The Invisible Dragon, Dave Hickey 1993

Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty

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

Edward Ruscha, "The Information Man"

I was drifting, daydreaming really, through the waning moments of a panel discussion on the subject of "What's Happening Now," drawing cartoon daggers on a yellow pad and formulating strategies for avoiding punch and cookies, when I realized that I was being addressed from the audience. A lanky graduate student had risen to his feet and was soliciting my opinion as to what the "Issue of the Nineties" would be. Snatched from my reverie, I said, "Beauty," and then, more firmly, "The issue of the nineties will be *beauty*!" It was a total improvisatory goof—an off-the-wall, jump-start free association that rose unbidden to my lips from God knows where. Or perhaps I was being ironic, wishing it so but not believing it likely? I don't know, but the total, uncomprehending silence that greeted this modest proposal lent it immediate credence for me.

My interlocutor plopped back into his seat, exuding dismay. Out of sheer perversity, I followed beauty where it led, into the

silence. Improvising, I began updating Pater: "Beauty is not a *thing*," I insisted. "The Beautiful is a thing. In images, beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder, and, since pleasure is the true occasion for looking at anything, any theory of images that is not grounded in the pleasure of the beholder begs the question of art's efficacy and dooms itself to inconsequence!" This sounded provocative, but the audience sat there unprovoked. "Beauty" just hovered there, a word without a language, quiet, amazing, and alien in that sleek, institutional space—like a Pre-Raphaelite dragon aloft on its leather wings.

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

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

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

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If you broached the issue of beauty in the American art world of 1988, you could not incite a conversation about rhetoric—or

efficacy—or pleasure—or politics—or even Bellini. You would instead ignite a conversation about the marketplace. That, at the time, was the "signified" of beauty. If I said, "Beauty," they said, "The corruption of the market," and I would say, "The corruption of the *market*?!" After thirty years of frenetic empowerment, during which the venues for contemporary art in the United Stated evolved from a tiny network of private galleries in New York into this vast, transcontinental sprawl of publicly funded, postmodern iceboxes? During which the ranks of "art professionals" swelled from a handful of dilettantes on the East Side of Manhattan into this massive civil service of PhDs and MFAs administering a monolithic system of interlocking patronage (which, in its constituents, resembles nothing so much as that of France in the early nineteenth century)? During which powerful corporate, governmental, cultural, and academic constituencies vied ruthlessly for power and tax-free dollars, each with its own self-perpetuating agenda and none with any vested interest in the subversive potential of visual pleasure? Under *these* cultural conditions, artists across this nation are obsessing about the *market*? Fretting about a handful of picture merchants nibbling canapés in Business Class? Blaming them for any work of art that does not incorporate raw plywood?

Under these cultural conditions, saying that the market is corrupt was like saying that the cancer patient has a hangnail. Yet manifestations of this *idée fixe* were pervasive—not least in the evanescence of the marketplace itself after thirty years of scorn for the intimacy of its transactions, but also in the radical discontinuity between serious criticism of contemporary art and that of historical art. At a time when easily 60 percent of historical criticism concerned itself with the influence of taste, patronage, and the canons of acceptability upon the images that a culture produces, the bulk of contemporary criticism, in a miasma of hallucinatory denial, resolutely ignored the possibility that every form of refuge has its price and satisfied itself with grousing about "the corruption of the market." The transactions of value enacted under the patronage of our new, "nonprofit" institutions were exempted from this cultural critique, presumed to be untainted, redemptive, disinterested, taste-free, and politically benign. Yeah, right.

During my informal canvass, I untangled the "reasoning" behind this presumption. Art dealers, I found, "only care about how it looks," while the art professionals employed by our new institutions "really care about what it means." Easy enough to say. Yet even if this were true (and I think it is), I can't imagine any but the most demented naïf giddily abandoning an autocrat who monitors appearances for a bureaucrat who monitors your soul. Nor could Michel Foucault, who makes a variation of this point in *Surveiller et punir*. Foucault poses for us the choice that is really at issue here, between bureaucratic surveillance and autocratic punishment. Foucault opens his book with a grisly antique text describing the lengthy public torture and ultimate execution of Damiens, the regicide. He then juxtaposes this cautionary spectacle of royal justice with the theory of reformative incarceration propounded by Jeremy Bentham in his "Panopticon."

Bentham's agenda, in contrast to the king's public savagery, is ostensibly benign. It reifies the benevolent passion for secret control that informs Chardin's pictorial practice, and, like Chardin, Bentham *cares*. He has no wish to punish, merely to reconstitute the offender's desire under the sheltering discipline of perpetual, covert, societal surveillance in the paternal hope that, like a child, the offender will ultimately internalize that surveillance as "conscience" and start controlling himself as a good citizen should. However, regardless of Bentham's ostensible benignity (and in fact, because of it), Foucault argues that the king's cruel justice is ultimately more just—because the king does not care what we *mean*. The king demands from us the appearance of loyalty, the rituals of fealty, and, if these are not forthcoming, he destroys our bodies, leaving us our convictions to die with. Bentham's warden, on the other hand, demands our *souls*, and, on the off chance that they are not forthcoming, or *cannot* come forth into social normality, he relies on our having internalized his relentless surveillance in the form of self-destructive guilt and henceforth punishing and ultimately destroying ourselves.

These are the options Foucault presents. Within the art community, I would suggest, the weight of the culture is so heavily on Bentham's side that we are unable to see them as equally tainted. We are such obedient children of the Panopticon, so devoted to care, surveillance, and the redeemable *souls* of things, that we have transformed the complex choice between the king's savage justice and Bentham's bureaucratic discipline into a progressive, utopian option: the "corrupt old market" versus the "brave new institution." Beauty in this scenario is despised because art dealers, like Foucault's king, traffic in objects and appearances. They value images that promise pleasure and excitement. Those that keep this promise are admitted to the court; those that fail are subject to the king's justice, which can be cruel and autocratic indeed. But there is another side to this coin. Art dealers are also like Foucault's king in that they do not care "what it means." As a consequence, radical content has traditionally flourished under the auspices of their profound disinterest.

The new, liberal institution, however, is not as cavalier about appearances as the market is about meaning. Like Bentham's benevolent warden, the institution's curators hold a public trust. They must look attentively and genuinely care about what artists mean, and what this meaning means in a public context—and, therefore, almost of necessity, they must distrust appearances. They must distrust the very idea of appearances, and distrust most of all the appearance of images that, by virtue of the pleasure they give, are efficacious in their own right. The appeal of these images amounts to a kind of ingratitude, since the entire project of the new institution is to lift the cruel burden of efficacy from the work of art and make it possible for artists to practice that "plain honesty" of which no great artist has ever been capable, nor ever wished to be. For those who would expose the inner soul of things to extended public scrutiny, sincerity—or the appearance of sincerity—is everything, and beauty is the bête noire, the snake in

the garden. It steals the institution's power, seduces its congregation, and elicits the dismay of artists who have committed themselves to the excruciating tedium of plain honesty.

The arguments such artists mount against beauty come down to one simple gripe: *Beauty sells*. Their complaints, of course, are couched in the language of academic radicalism, but they do not differ greatly from my grandmother's *haut bourgeois* prejudices against people "in trade" and people who get their names in the newspaper. Beautiful art sells. If it sells itself, it is an idolatrous commodity; if it sells something else, it is a seductive advertisement. Art is not idolatry, they argue, nor is it advertising. Idolatry and advertising, however, are indeed art, and the greatest works of art are always and inevitably a bit of both. (What then must we make of those unsalable works of art that the institution buys at such generous prices because they lack salable attributes? Is the institution itself not a marketplace?)

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

During the Renaissance, for the first time in history, the power of priestly and governmental bureaucracies to assign meaning to images begins to erode, and the private encounter between the image and its beholder takes on the potential of changing the public character of institutions. Images become mobile at this point, and irrevocably political. Henceforth, for more than four centuries subsequent to the rise of easel painting, images *argue* for things—for doctrines, rights, privileges, ideologies, territories, and reputations. Throughout this period, a loose, protean collection of tropes and figures signifying "beauty" functions as the *pathos* that recommends the *logos* and *ethos* of visual argumentation to our attention. The task of beauty is to enfranchise the audience and acknowledge its power—to designate a territory of shared values between the image and its beholder and then, in this territory, to advance an argument by valorizing the picture's problematic content. Without the urgent intention of reconstructing the beholder's view of things, the image has no reason to exist, much

CARAVAGGIO *Madonna of the Rosary with Saint Dominic and Saint Peter Martyr.* OIL ON CANVAS, 1607. KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA. PHOTO: ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.

less to be beautiful. The comfort of the familiar always bears with it the frisson of the exotic, and the effect of this conflation, ideally, is persuasive excitement—visual pleasure. As Baudelaire says, "the beautiful is always strange," by which he means, of course, that it is always strangely familiar and vaguely surprising.

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

Before we genuflect, however, we must ask ourselves if Caravaggio's "realism" would have been so trenchant, or his formal ac-

complishment so delicately spectacular, had his contemporary political agenda, under the critical pressure of a rival church, seemed less urgent? And we must ask ourselves if the painting would even have survived until Rubens bought it had it not somehow expedited that agenda? I doubt it. We are a litigious civilization and we do not like losers. The history of beauty, like all history, tells the winner's tale, in the great mausoleums where images like Caravaggio's, having done their work in the world, are entombed—and where, even hanging in state, they provide us with a ravishing and poignant visual experience. One wonders, however, whether we do well to ground our standards for the pleasures of art in the glamorous *tristesse* we feel in the presence of these institutionalized warhorses—whether contemporary images are really enhanced by being interned in a museum at birth and attended as one might a movie, whether there might not be work for them to do in the world among the living.

For more than four centuries, the idea of "making it beautiful" has been the keystone of our cultural vernacular—the lover's machine gun and the prisoner's joy—the last redoubt of the disenfranchised and the single direct route, without a detour through church or state, from the image to the individual. Now that lost generosity, like Banquo's ghost, is doomed to haunt our discourse about contemporary art—no longer required to recommend images to our attention or to insinuate them into vernacular memory, no longer welcome even to try. The route from the image to the beholder now detours through an alternative institution, ostensibly distinct from church and state. It is not hard, however, to detect the aroma of Caravaggio's priests as one treads its gray wool carpets or cools one's heels in its arctic waiting rooms. One must suspect that we are denied the direct appeal of beauty for much the same reason that Caravaggio's supplicants were denied direct appeal to the Virgin: to sustain the jobs of bureaucrats. Caravaggio, at least, *shows* us the Virgin, in all her gorgeous autonomy, before instructing us not to look at her and redirecting our guilty eyes to that string of wooden beads hanging from the priest's fingers. The priests of the new church are not so generous. Beauty has been banished from their domain and we are left counting the beads and muttering the texts of academic sincerity.

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

across the front pages of America and fairly daring the fascist heel to crush its outraged innocence.

Moreover, this community chose to ignore the specific legal transgressions celebrated in Robert's photographs in favor of the "higher politics." It came out strenuously in defense of the status quo and all the perks, privileges, and public money it had acquired over the last thirty years, and did so under the tattered banner of "free expression"—a catchphrase that I presumed to have been largely discredited by the feminist critique of images. After all, once a community acquiesces in the assumption that *some* images are certifiably toxic, it opens the door to the toxification of *any* image.

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

So it is not the fact that men are depicted having sex in Robert's images. At the time, they were regularly portrayed doing so on the walls of private galleries and publicly funded "alternative" spaces all over the country. Thanks to the cult of plain honesty, abjection, and sincere appearance, however, they were not portrayed as doing so *persuasively,* powerfully, beautifully. Robert makes it beautiful. He appropriates a Baroque vernacular of beauty that predates and, clearly, outperforms the puritanical canon of visual appeal espoused by the therapeutic institution. He poses what, for the institution, is an unanswerable question: Should we really look at art, however banal, because looking at art is somehow good for us, while ignoring any specific good that the individual work or artist might propose to us?

The habit of subordinating the artist's politics to the "higher politics of expression" makes perfect sense in the mausoleums of antiquity, where we can hardly do otherwise. It is, perhaps, "good" for us to look at *The Madonna of the Rosary* without blanching at its Counter-Reformation politics, because those politics are dead. It may be good for us, as well, to look at a Sir Thomas Lawrence portrait and "understand" his identification of romantic heroism with the landed aristocracy. It is insane and morally ignorant, however, to confront the work of a liv-

ing (and at that time, dying) artist as we might the artifacts of lost Atlantis, with forgiving connoisseurship—to mildly "appreciate" his passionate, partisan, and political celebrations of the American margin. In our mild appreciation, we refuse to engage the argument of images that deal so intimately with trust, pain, love, and the giving up of the self.

Yet this is exactly what is expected and desired, not by the government, but by the art establishment. It is a matter of "free expression," and thus the defense of the museum director prosecuted for exhibiting the images was conducted almost entirely as a defense of the redemptive nature of formal beauty and the critical virtue of oversight and surveillance. The "sophisticated" beholder, the jury is told, responds to the elegance of the form regardless of the subject matter. Even so, this beholder must be "brave" enough to look at "reality" and "understand" the sources of that formal beauty in the artist's tortured private pathology. If this sounds like the old patriarchal doodah about transcendent formal values and humane realism, it is, with the additional fillip that, in the courts of Ohio, the source of beauty is now taken to be, not the corruption of the market, but the corruption of the *artist*. Clearly, all this litigation to establish Robert Mapplethorpe's "corruption" would have been unnecessary if his images *acknowledged* their corruption and thus qualified for our forgiveness and understanding. But they do not.

There is no better proof of this than the fact that, while the Mapplethorpe controversy is raging, Francis Bacon's retrospective is packing them in at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Joel-Peter Witkin is exhibiting in constitutional serenity. Bacon's and Witkin's images speak a language of symptoms, of flagrant corruption, that is profoundly tolerable to the status quo. Bacon and Witkin mystify Mapplethorpe's content, aestheticize it, localize it, and further marginalize it as "artistic behavior," with signifiers denoting angst, guilt, and despair. So, clearly, it is not the thing portrayed that challenges us in Robert's images. It is his impudent resort to *praise* of the margin (not some vague critique of the mainstream) that challenges the powers that be. Critique of the mainstream ennobles the therapeutic institution's ostensible role as shadow government and disguises its unacknowledged mandate to neutralize dissent by first ghettoizing and then mystifying it. Confronted by images like Mapplethorpe's that appeal directly to the beholder and disdain the therapeutic institution's umbrella of "care," the institution is disclosed for what it is: the moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization.

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