

The New York Times

Think Tank; Rescuing Beauty, Then Bowing to Her Power

Plato insisted beauty was an "eternal" and "absolute" quality.

Keats wrote "Beauty is truth."

And those who subscribe to cultural relativism are only among the most current advocates of the idiom "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

Whatever it is, a group of critics have been complaining that beauty has dropped from serious discussions about art.

Six years ago, an article by Arthur C. Danto, the art critic, appeared in *The Nation* with the indignant title "What Happened to Beauty?" The very idea of beauty, Mr. Danto wrote, had become "irrelevant to the aims of art." Artists from the Dadaists to post-modern relativists had made a practice of treating beauty with "disregard or even repudiation."

It was not an altogether new observation. For more than 30 years, beauty in contemporary art had been seen as cause for suspicion, a mark of shallowness or frivolity, a catering to "the market." The movement away from traditional notions of beauty in art started much earlier. Advances in photography, the upheavals of 20th-century wars and political activism all contributed to the devaluation of beauty as much as changing tastes and social norms did. By the late 1960's, women, long considered the ultimate repository of beauty, began pushing aside such traditionally feminine concerns in hopes of being taken seriously in the workplace. Artists no longer aspired to "beauty" but to "meaning" and "strength."

Over the last few years, however, something resembling a countermovement has emerged, taking the shape of a growing number of seminars, lectures, books and even artwork devoted to the notion of beauty and esthetics.

In a 1994 essay titled "Enter the Dragon: The Vernacular of Beauty," Dave Hickey proclaimed beauty to be "the issue of the 90's." "The vernacular of beauty, in its democratic appeal, remains a potent instrument for change in this civilization," he wrote.

Two years later, Peter Schjeldahl wrote that beauty -- "the ultimate weapon, the Big One of the esthetic" -- was headed for a renaissance. The article, which appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, was titled: "Beauty Is Back: A Trampled Esthetic Blooms Again."

Now a new anthology of essays, "Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics" (Allworth Press/School of Visual Arts) seeks to examine the changing role of beauty in the 20th century and give beauty a kind of critical makeover.

Edited by Bill Beckley, an artist and teacher of semiotics, with help from David Shapiro, a poet and art critic, "Uncontrollable Beauty" includes essays by some 30 artists, curators, philosophers and critics, from Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe to Louise Bourgeois.

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It also offers a 1985 debate between the critic Thomas McEvelley and Kirk Varnedoe and William Rubin, both of the Museum of Modern Art, over "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," an exhibition held at the museum in 1984.

"That debate was important historically, because it was the beginning of a contemporary cultural debate about who owns beauty," Mr. Beckley said.

The exchange, which took place in letters to the editor of the journals *Artforum* and *Art in America*, centered on Mr. McEvelley's complaint, among other things, that some pieces included in the show were not considered art within the culture in which they were made and had been used to validate "modern art." He accused the exhibition of using "a foreign sector of the world" to 'revalidate classical modernist esthetics' as timeless and universal.

To many, the very word beauty seems to have become a muddled cliché. Time for a new definition, or at least a refinement of old ones, the critics included in this volume say. Thus, while turning to Kant, Freud, John Ruskin and even Dr. Seuss for inspiration, many of the writings offer beauty a fresh face, casting it as a healing, personal, unpredictable, ungovernable experience.

In "Uncontrollable Beauty," Mr. Hickey defends beauty not as a "thing" or quality, but as an experience. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe suggests that beauty is "irreducibly feminine" and "a matter not only of the attractive but precisely of the glamorous, and as such, anything but passive." Agnes Martin describes it as "the mystery of life" and an "awareness of perfection." Robert Morgan defines it simply as "an act of grace." And Robert Farris Thompson steps past beauty to offer a treatise on the word "cool."

Mr. Beckley was inspired to put together "Uncontrollable Beauty" after stumbling upon a book published in 1931 by Oxford University Press, "Philosophies of Beauty: From Socrates to Robert Bridges." He said he had also come across a number of recent essays on beauty by writers he admired. So he and Mr. Shapiro began looking for other essays and for writers who might contribute.

After trying unsuccessfully to get Ms. Bourgeois, at age 86, to submit a piece on beauty, Mr. Beckley went to her home in the Chelsea area of Manhattan to interview her one Sunday last summer. "One of the first things she said was, 'I don't talk about beauty,'" he said. But then, with almost no prodding, she remarked that "Beauty is a series of experiences" and "a mystified expression of our own emotion." The two artists spent the next three Sundays absorbed in conversation about beauty and art.