



## Tainted Beauty: Philosophy and a Manifesto

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To cite this article: Anne-Marie Willis (2003) Tainted Beauty: Philosophy and a Manifesto, Design Philosophy Papers, 1:2, 51-58

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871303X13965299301597>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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## EDITORIAL

# Tainted Beauty

## Philosophy and a Manifesto

**Anne-Marie Willis**

Welcome to this second issue of *Design Philosophy Papers*. We have been very encouraged by the positive responses, including many offers of papers and books to review from many parts of the world. We hope that the enthusiasm for DPP is soon reflected in a growing number of subscriptions, which are needed for this independent project to flourish.

Beauty is the theme of this issue. Such a seemingly arcane subject needs explanation, which is given below in some detail – possibly more than is usual for an editorial, but difficult to resist, given the richness of the ideas raised in both papers. But first a word or two about the other contributions.

In *Voice of Sustainment*, Tony Fry continues exploring the idea put forward in the first issue of *DPP*, this time asking ‘why philosophy?’ and what relevance it could have for ‘the sustainment’. William McNeill responds by considering whether a thought of anything like the sustainment can be found in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

In *Hot Debate*, a ‘Manifesto for Redirective Design’ is put forward. This emerged from longstanding dialogues between Clive Dilnot and Tony Fry; it is no doubt an incomplete and imperfect document, but is presented here with the aim of upping the stakes of design debate and provoking responses – which are very welcome and will be published in the next issue of *DPP*. To maximise the number of contributors, we’re imposing a limit of 500 words each. The copy deadline is 31 May.

Now to the question of beauty .....

I know how suspect the word ‘aesthetic’ must sound to you. You think perhaps of professors who, with their eyes raised to heaven, spew forth formalistic laws of eternal and everlasting beauty, which are no more than recipes for the production of ephemeral, classicist kitsch. In fact the opposite must be the case in true aesthetics ...

... Aesthetics becomes a practical necessity once it becomes clear that concepts like usefulness and uselessness in art, like the separation of autonomous and purpose-oriented art, imagination, and ornament, must once again be discussed.<sup>1</sup>

The quest to define the nature of beauty has been a central concern of philosophy in the West since the ancient Greeks. The two papers published here do not seek to give an account of the history of the idea, they (and this introduction) do not address or only mention in passing Plato’s theory of forms or the distinctions aestheticians have made between taste, beauty and style. While what is presented is partial, it does aim to open up beauty as something to be thought. Both papers explore what beauty might mean in today’s world, and while their interests in the topic and their conclusions are different, both explore beauty as a powerful idea which has mutated strangely, often with destructive consequences, as it traveled in the time from the ancient to the modern world.

Why address beauty now? What relevance could it have in these times of uncertainty, fear and of widening chasms between systems of belief? Karsten Harries begins his paper with this very question and puts a case for why beauty matters, linking it to the uniqueness of individual human beings and their potential for freedom, which he sees as under threat today.

In contrast, in his paper, Cameron Tonkinwise is concerned with how designers could deploy beauty as a way of prompting more sustainable modes of behaviour. This connects back to Ezio Manzini’s ‘Scenarios of Sustainable Wellbeing’ in the first issue of *Design Philosophy Papers*. Cameron Tonkinwise is well-aware of the philosophical contradictions inherent in the proposition of strategically ‘using beauty’, but pushes beyond these, arguing for a remaking of the idea of ‘beauty in use’.

We decided to focus on beauty in this issue because it continues to be such a powerful motivating idea in contemporary culture. We are besieged by the claim of beauty. It comes at us all the time – from television, billboards, magazines, shop displays, public spaces, interiors, facades and landscapes or in the forms of idealised bodies, faces, products and settings. Designers are at work in the thick of all this. It follows that the question of beauty must be of interest to them. But ‘on the job’ it’s not pursued. It’s as if everyone just automatically knows what’s beautiful. Beauty gets dealt with instrumentally: by generating more and more images of sure fire-designed-to-appeal beauty or by occasionally breaking conventions to shock, attract publicity (as with ‘heroin chic’) or to constitute a new niche market. In the more relaxed context of professional exchange, beauty is likely to be fleetingly referenced as an unquestioned value, part of a designer’s ‘personal philosophy’.

Beauty is assumed as an absolute value, a court of final appeal, a resting place of or beyond meaning. Many philosophers have enshrined it in this hallowed place by cordoning beauty off from lesser attributes such as the merely pleasing or the well-executed and placing it beyond the shifting sands of taste and fashion. Today this notion of beauty survives as a hollowed-out idea. ‘Timeless beauty’ is now no more than a marketing cliché. And Plato’s notions of ideal forms have percolated through western culture over centuries, ending up as sets of internally coherent but arbitrary aesthetic ‘type-form’ conventions about proportion etc. (and their just as arbitrary ‘challenging’) for everything from art and graphic design to dog-breeding and plastic surgery.

Art critics write rapturously about the experience of beauty – its ineffability, its singularity, treating it as a rare and finely tuned response by a sensitive individual to subtle emanations from a beautiful object. The flawed assumption is that beauty resides in the object itself, rather than in the perceiver. No doubt inspired by intense experiences of beauty – in art or nature or both – and following Kant’s idea that the pleasure obtained from beauty is uniquely desire-free, philosophers of aesthetics spent much time trying to define a specific ‘aesthetic emotion’. A nice idea: the virtuous contemplation of perfection, but one that can barely survive the transplant from a divine order to a secular world.

In everyday life the appreciation of beauty is rarely self-sufficient, as it is situated in contexts of desire, ownership and commodity status. Frequently a love of beauty is the spark that ignites less worthy human emotions such as vanity, jealousy, greed, lust and covetousness.

The pursuit of beauty took an ugly turn in the modern world, as its commodified forms expanded and colonised more and more aspects of life and culture. This tainted beauty is not the result of a flaw in human nature, but rather of the way in which human beings are now formed in the totalising environment of the sign economy.

The most extreme example is the perpetuation of Hollywood ideals of female beauty, as undergirded by the multi-billion dollar fashion, cosmetics and plastic surgery industries, encouraging women to transform their faces and bodies into beautiful images because they live in a self-preoccupied, avaricious, over-fed culture which fails to provide the conditions which would nurture (and which materially would look and feel very different from what they are now) what Karsten Harries refers to as beauty of spirit.

The idea that individual instances of that designated as beautiful might share a common thread or that there might be an irreducible essence to beauty – these are not propositions pursued today. The commonsense position in our era of mass individualisation and ‘the proliferation of difference as the same’ is that people (as consumer subjects) select out from the onslaught of images and styles and create their own customised menus of the beautiful. Relativism rules and it’s widely considered uncool to sit in judgement on other people’s taste (publicly anyway).

What Karsten Harries argues goes against this grain, this by making a distinction between beauty as mask and as veil. Controversially, he passes judgement on the beauty of contemporary women. For Harries, following Nietzsche, mask-like beauty is only skin deep, hiding that which lies beneath it, often also concealing an absence of ‘spirit’. Conversely, the beauty of the veil is more substantial, layered and complex, and not dependant on instant visual appeal. Unlike the mask, there is a necessary connection between the veil and the veiled because “a veil shelters what is taken to matter more”. Karsten Harries explores the implications of mask and veil for architecture. He could have also cited industrial designers as mask-makers par excellence as they conceal the product’s working parts (the soul of the machine?) beneath beautiful forms.

As you will see, Cameron Tonkinwise questions the centuries-old notion of the experience of beauty as a civilising force that inspires exemplary forms of human behaviour. A contemporary version of this claimed efficacy is that beautifully designed things are more likely to be valued, treated with care, will last longer and ipso facto are more sustainable. He argues that this glosses over the dominant (but rarely articulated) sense of beauty as something over, above and beyond, of beauty as something to contemplate rather than to engage. The philosophical baggage of beauty deposits designated beautiful objects into hermetically sealed contexts (museums, style magazines and expensive books) where they cannot participate transformatively in everyday life. He argues that designers need to focus less on beauty as appearance and more on beauty-in-use. But this requires a different understanding of beauty, which he pursues.

Both papers reject that which is merely formally beautiful, seeking a deeper kind of beauty. Both are haunted by the ghost

of functionalism. Harries cites Louis Sullivan's plea that we must listen to the voice of nature, but acknowledges that this would mean something very different today than in Sullivan's time. Turning to one of Sullivan's influences, Horatio Greenough, we find a partial premonition of Harries' thoughts. In the mid 1850s Greenough, a minor American sculptor but early theorist of functionalist design, wrote:

The redundant must be pared down, the superfluous dropped, the necessary itself reduced to its simplest expression, and then we shall find, whatever the organisation may be, that beauty was waiting for us, though perhaps veiled, until our task was fully accomplished.<sup>2</sup>

Such words reverberated through twentieth century architecture and design (though Greenough's authorship remained largely invisible), echoed by many including Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos, Bruno Taut, Le Corbusier. An even clearer statement of the nascent functionalist philosophy comes from Greenough's observation of the natural world:

If there be any principle of structure more plainly inculcated in the works of the Creator than all others, it is the principle of unflinching adaptation of forms to function.<sup>3</sup>

While conceived of within a creationist world view, functionalism was an idea that survived evolutionism and was easily adapted to secular society, being taken up by many disciplines including sociology. In architecture and design it was seized on by those who recoiled against the elaboration of Victorian taste, as the basis of a new aesthetic thought to be more attuned to mass production and mass society. The natural world as a model for 'beautifully functioning forms' was a central component of the functionalist philosophy. So too was the idea of 'beauty in use'.<sup>4</sup>

But there was a twist when functionalism became an aesthetic. For example, in his very influential photographically illustrated books Le Corbusier celebrated the distinctive forms of functional objects, thus turning function into the sign of functionality (or as Theodor Adorno put it "the absolute rejection of style becomes style"). This is the problematic heritage of much contemporary design, seen in many examples such as when simplicity is taken up as an aesthetic to layer onto something rather than as a generative principle. Aesthetics has always proved an ineffective means for those who would wish to create a better society. In its long-running war against the establishment, the history of the avant-garde is littered with dead bodies dressed in many colourful uniforms. This is the risk taken when all eggs are put in the beauty (or even self-conscious anti-beauty) basket. A lesson so many architects and other kinds of designers have yet to learn.

Of course, the fallout of functionalism is much greater than just a lingering aesthetic. While contemporary technologies, especially electronics, have significantly disarticulated function from form, the functionalist spirit lives on in notions like ergonomics, user-centred design and use itself.

As you will read, neither of the writers of these papers puts their faith in aesthetic strategies. What business do they have with beauty then?

Let's change tack and speculate on the nature of beauty by adopting a more 'innocent' posture, ignorant of the philosophical weight of our topic. Allow me the indulgence for a moment.

Beauty: what qualities, characteristics, and sensations does the word conjure up?

Transcendent, sublime, uplifting, wondrous in one direction. Tranquillity, calm, peace, contentment, stillness in another. Maybe associations with joy, delight and wonder.

Or perhaps perfection, completeness, fulfilment. Fragility, preciousness, transience, something to be cherished. Or permanence, something stronger and larger than ourselves. Then there is order, harmony, rightness.

Or is beauty just a minor aspect, a bit player amongst these larger more compelling associations and feelings? Is there something cold and lifeless about beauty? Yes perhaps, especially when it is actively pursued as an ideal in the construction of self-image in the image of an ideal other, or when it's pursued as something to appropriate or possess, as in tourism's promise of the experience of the beauty of an exotic place or the beautiful object, rare plant, animal or person-as-object that a collector or someone else might seek to make their own.

Beauty: look for it, hunt it down, capture it, but then it evaporates into thin air, only to re-condense as the merely pleasing, the conventionally pretty.

In contrast to the calculated pursuit, is beauty discovered where it's least expected – a metaphorical jewel in a rubbish heap, a shaft of sunlight in a mean back street, the momentarily glimpsed potential of a child in that mean back street, hope and a spark of life gleaming across the face of someone undergoing extreme suffering or in crushing circumstances. Or as Karsten Harries says, after Nietzsche, 'beauty as the veil of spirit', spirit being that which animates and which 'betrays itself in fleeting expressions, gestures, in the movement of a hand, a tossed head, a passing glance'. This is beauty that cannot be sought out, that shines forth *despite*... whatever. Not that such experiences cannot (in fact have) been reified, turned into cliché, captured, framed and imprisoned in both the best and worst examples in art and mass culture.

Beauty can also be just plain ordinary, but in an affirmative sense. We think here of trees, flowers, a sunny day, a brisk morning signaling the change of seasons or the simple everyday pleasures

of the being of and the being with things we have chosen to have around us – a favorite teacup, a chair, a pebble washed smooth by the sea picked up on a beach and now sitting on our desk. This is commonplace beauty (I'll live with that contradiction) available to anyone irrespective of circumstances of wealth or poverty (in fact more likely to be cherished in a circumstances of less wealth). It grows out of what one loves rather than asserting what one should love because 'it' is beautiful. Of course beauty as a value projected onto the natural world has been the staple of poets and artists over many centuries, and it is also just as vulnerable to cliché, debasement, reification as the previous set of examples.

The experience of beauty can seem accidental, incidental, something stumbled on by surprise. But at the same time it's probably the most intense of all our projections (the beauty a lover sees in a loved one that no-one else can recognise. The experience of beauty is always prefigured by a particular disposition. Beauty withdraws in conditions of unhappiness. The beauty of something encountered everyday can remain invisible for years, decades, and then one day, because of something else that has occurred, some change in someone's life, it can burst forth, seen for the first time. The reverse is true and can be just as revelatory: when an object of beauty is revealed as a sham: someone points out the cracks in the mask you'd never seen before because you'd been so enthralled by its beauty.

Beauty does not respect place(ment). It can, for the seer, arrive anywhere, and so be found in the most sublime or impoverished circumstances.

Both Harries and Tonkinwise acknowledge that beauty, divorced from the sacred, as it is in the modern world, has become something applied, added, either a mask that covers over an absence, or a concealment of damage wrought by the world(ing) of designed product environments.

Explicitly, Cameron Tonkinwise asks whether use, activity and engagement foreclose on the experience of beauty which is meant to be all about standing back and admiring.

Constructively, both papers point to a remaking of beauty. Is it an idea that can be infused with new life, and taken beyond the dominantly mask-like forms of which Karsten Harries is critical? Is the problem our culture's massive over-investment in the beauty of the seen? What of music, the songs of birds or the beauty of mind?

Please read on ....

## Notes

1. Theodor Adorno 'Functionalism Today' (Functionalismus Heute, 1965) trans J.O. Newman & J.H. Smith *Oppositions* MIT: 17, Summer, 1979.



2. Horatio Greenough *Form and Function: Remarks on Art, Design and Architecture* ed. H.A. Small, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947, p. 128.
3. Greenough, p. 118.
4. For example Bruno Taut, “if everything is founded on sound efficiency, this efficiency itself, or rather its utility will form its own aesthetic law.” Taut says that the beauty of a building can be deduced from its ground plan rather than its façade because the ground plan reveals whether the building is “nicely adapted for use”. He then goes on to claim “If this is the case, it will not only fulfill our needs, but organise them into a superior and better order than previously experienced. The architect who achieves this task becomes a creator of an ethical and social character; the people who use the building for any purpose, will, through the structure of the house, be brought to a better behaviour in their mutual dealings and relationship with each other”. ‘Five Points’ (1929) in Tim & Charlotte Benson with Dennis Sharp (eds.) *Form and Function: A Source Book for the History of Architecture and Design 1890–1939* London: The Open University Press, 1975.