



“The Embarrassment of Beauty”

*A survey into the changing views on
Beauty in Art*

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Introduction

My beauty :

'On a cold and misty winter morning I take my horse out for a ride. In between the pine trees the soil is soft ,muffling the sound of the hoofbeats of a frisky gallop. We reach the clearing in the wood where grasses grow with an occasional bush of small beeches. The horse and I come to a complete standstill. The sun has come out lighting up the frozen mist in a sparkling, frosted landscape . We are engulfed in a world of silence and I can feel our heartbeats drop. The horse, obviously under the same spell, takes to a slow walk through this white , mesmerizing world of diamond-like beauty. We are one and I am profoundly moved.'

This happened when was some fourteen years old but my earliest memory of beauty is connected to me visiting the Blue Mosque in Istanbul as a small child. I experienced the blue as a palpable energy that filled my whole being . For one brief instant I was able to recognize and understand the true essence of blue.

Experiences such as these have enriched my life and I treasure them.

Beauty plays an important part in my life and for any artist who sets out to work with glass ,beauty is a constant companion. This medium carries an intrinsic beauty and I have much love for the material . Entering the glass department as a first year student I expect this love to be shared . However, I am told glass is just another material, a snare, seductive and pleasing to the eye. "Glass is a whore", says my tutor Mia Lerssi. I am shocked. Is this then what I am doing, am I really making just another nice object? What then is my aim as an artist, is it about making objects of beauty and if so what does that mean? What would be the deeper relationship between beauty and art?

In my search to find an answer to these questions I quickly found myself in a no-go area: beauty was no longer considered an interesting field for research and a topic best not spoken about at all. I wondered what had happened to the art world that she no longer wants to deal with this subject. Has art itself changed, do artists still concern themselves with beauty?

I think they do! So all the more reason to put beauty back on the agenda. For it seems that beauty has changed and through this research I want to find out in what way. What happened to beauty in art and what does that mean for me as an artist? What are my artistic views on beauty ?

This thesis consists of three parts. Part one is about the philosophers viewpoint, part two deals with the critics' approach to contemporary art and the third part showcases the actual artwork.

Philosophers Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger with their views on art and the artist speak directly to my heart. Kants approach is entirely subjective, the experience we have when we witness beauty is his starting point. He uses the word 'aesthetic' allways in the original meaning: the sensory perception. In his time, art and beauty were still undisputably bonded. There was no reason for him to approach the subject of beauty and art separately. Heidegger takes a completely different view. His theory starts with the artwork and his idea about the essence of art incorporates beauty as well.For that reason they are both crucial to me. They complement one another in their vision and I find myself unable to do without any one of them because they enlighten in words what I intuitively feel as an artist.

Critics Clement Greenberg and Dave Hickey gave me an insight in what is happening in the world of art today and how beauty has its place therein. In his essays on beauty Hickey not only

talks about beauty's new face but he also explains what it looks like and how beauty is approached within the discourse on art today.

Greenberg's article is very important because with his plea for viewing and judging art in its own autonomous field he offers a solution for the embarrassment that beauty apparently causes artists and the artworld today.

The third part deals with the artwork itself. Damien Hirst's 'For the love of God' is a good example of the schism in beauty: the gap that exists between beauty as it is understood by Kant or Heidegger and the views on beauty by the contemporary Institution of Art. Exhibiting the skull caused a pandemonium which revealed clearly how deep and fundamental the differences in views on beauty in art are.

This thesis is written by an artist and it is my viewpoint as an artist which serves as a starting point throughout the whole research. I give my personal observations and feelings in the parts printed in italics. In doing so I place myself within and opposite the theories that I research in order to explore the limitations of my thoughts, the frame wherein I live and work as a human being, my aesthetic conviction and my artistic goal.

It is an exercise of thoughts but not in order to find the truth. I allow myself the freedom to tell what matters to me, never pretending to be complete.

Chapter 1: Beauty according to Kant

Immanuel Kant 1724-1804. German philosopher who lived during the time of the Enlightenment. He wrote three critiques of which the first Critique of Pure Reason investigates the relationship between our cognitive abilities and physical reality. The second, Critique of Practical Reason deals with Ethics. The last, called Critique of Judgment, deals with beauty and art and his teleological theory.

1.1 A subjective approach

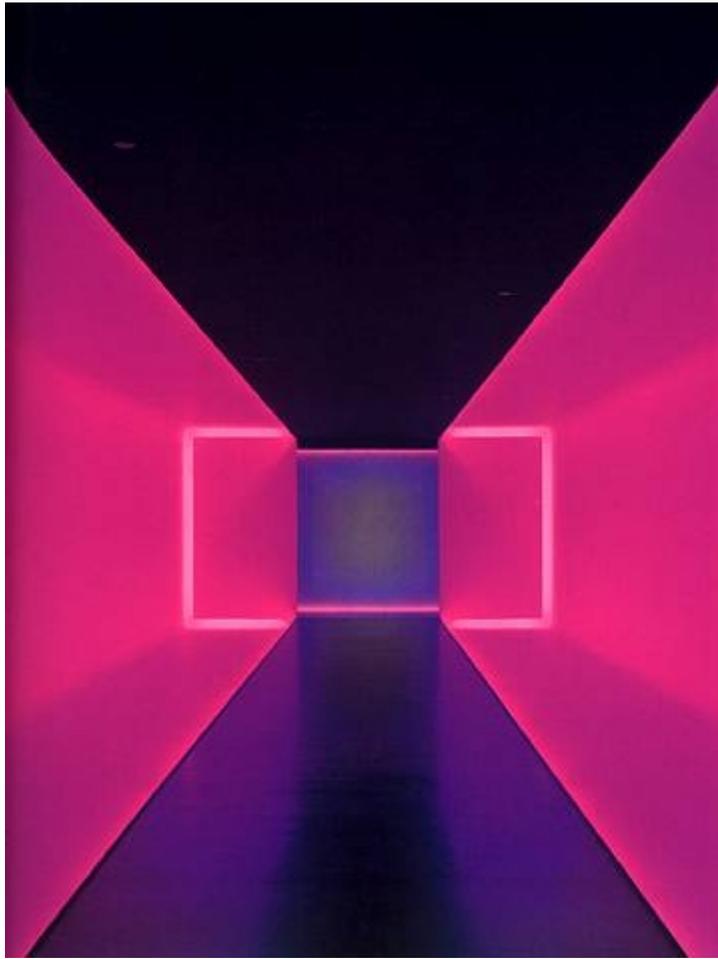
According to Kant beauty is entirely a matter of the sensory experience of the subject.[1] In experiencing the beautiful we come to what he calls an aesthetic judgment. Object related features that would define it as an object of beauty are not taken into consideration. He states: There are no objective qualities that define an object as beautiful. Glass however, does have the 'wow-factor'. Edmund Burke [2] defined a number of properties that any object should have in order to be considered beautiful such as a smooth surface, curves, color, lucidity, fragility, structure and so on. Glass has these qualities by nature and is therefore instantly considered a thing of beauty. A blessing or curse for the artist?

The fact that we are able to recognize and appreciate beauty has to do with our ability for passing judgment Kant calls this ability taste, which is applied to all our experiences with beauty regardless of where they come from, be it natural beauty or beauty in art.

The idea of taste as being applicable to beauty in nature is a strange concept to us nowadays. Kant's' concept of taste has nothing to do with personal preference or a preordained canon but refers to a kind of metaphysical recognition to which we all can relate, in the way that I could, being that small child in the Blue Mosque . It's not an idea of beauty that has been taught to us, it is a metaphysical knowledge that is so universal that it even seems to apply to animals as well. Almost as if it were a keystone to all life, like matter. Taste as an element of the periodic table, fancy that!

Kant starts his theory by examining our personal experience and the aesthetic judgment that follows it. He believes that four conditions have to be met in order for us to pass that judgment. Subsequently he investigates what underlying fundament makes it possible for us to judge. It may seem odd that he takes this approach but Kant chose to do it this way because he believes the starting point is the feeling we get through our sensory encounter with beauty that sets everything else in motion.

Then he turns to questioning the value of our aesthetic judgment.



James Turrell

The Light Inside, 2000

**“My work is more about your vision than mine even though it is the result of my vision.”
James Turrell.**

Turrell's work is about perception , sensitive awareness, beauty. His aim is to give the viewer an aesthetic experience based on a sensory input. I appreciate his work a lot and I can easily relate the work to Kant's theory and to Heidegger's view on the essence of art.

1.2 Experiencing Beauty

Kant makes a distinction between images that can be perceived by our senses and intuition on the one hand and images and concepts of the cognitive mind, our intellect on the other. In order for us to come to an aesthetic judgment we have to have both feeling and mind. It is a combination of both, what starts with a sensory experience is followed closely by an understanding each time we encounter beauty. The aesthetic judgment takes place at the interface of the two. Here it becomes most apparent why Kant uses the word aesthetic in its original meaning only in relation to a sensory perception.

What is important is this fact that, according to Kant, there is no perception of beauty in which the intellect plays no role because then there is no judgment. This would suggest that any experience that is purely sensory is nothing more than an impression like those of a baby for instance. But when people say they experience something for which they have no words and that they are unable to process intellectually there is still the emotion of a feeling of beauty. I am convinced art is capable of doing exactly that, giving us an emotional satisfaction and fulfillment through beauty. Art that does not concern itself with beauty anymore would deny us these spiritual riches and with dire consequence I believe.

1.2.1 Conditions of the aesthetic judgment

To pass an aesthetic judgment, four terms have to be met. First: **disinterestedness**:

The subject has no personal gain by what he witnesses. Beauty brings us pleasure but not lust nor the fulfillment of a need like consolation or possession. Any experience that is evoked by need is focusing on the object instead of the subject's feeling. It is then no longer possible to come to an aesthetic judgment of beauty according to Kant.

Kahlil Gibran writes about beauty in his book "*The Prophet*":

“And beauty is not a need but an ecstasy.

It is not a mouth thirsting nor an empty hand stretched forth,
But rather a heart inflamed and a soul enchanted.

It is not the image you would see nor the song you would hear,

But rather an image you see though you close your eyes and a song you hear though you shut your ears.

It is not the sap within the furrowed bark, nor a wing attached to a claw,

But rather a garden for ever in bloom and a flock of angels for ever in flight.”[3]

Gibran disengages the intellect from beauty and in doing so, only pure emotion remains.

The second term deals with the role of feeling versus mind: the beautiful is what generally pleases without **understanding**. [4] Keyword here is understanding. The intellect has no determining role. I do not have to be able to read notation in order to appreciate the beauty of music. The starting point in Kant's theory is always the feeling, the emotion, never the mind.

Purposiveness without purpose is the third term and it is the least understandable in relation to art. We could understand the idea of purposiveness of beauty in nature because, even though the ultimate goal eludes us, it looks so well thought of that we can accept that it may have a purpose. But surely art has a purpose? So does purposiveness have a shape? What would that look like in a work of art?

According to Kant purposiveness in art is the quality of an artwork that raises the illusion that something is made according to an idea or a plan. Beauty in nature has that quality. Does this mean it is a property of an object? Not for Kant. He sticks to the observing subject:

'Beauty is the shape of purposiveness of an object where it is perceived without concept of a purpose'.(transl.)[4,blz150] Kant refers to the feeling that allows us to experience beauty as something other than coincidental without the need for knowing it's purpose.

Contemporary art theory sees beauty only in relation to it's function for the art piece. In this view, beauty is used as a means to communicate the concept of an art piece more easily, or it is there for commercial purpose only. Beauty has lost it's credit apparently and is now being rationalized. Confidence is gone, beauty is no more than a pretty thing. It is considered suspect and so is the medium glass. I feel my integrity as an artist is being questioned and that touches me deeply.

Nowadays it is better for any artist to speak of 'truth' and 'honesty'. Critics as well as spectators use the word 'interesting' rather than face the embarrassment that beauty brings us today.

According to Kant, feelings and emotions play a crucial role in the aesthetic judgment and so we can ask ourselves: in what way? This brings us to the fourth term of **'universal agreement'**. Kant says that our ability to judge is universal, it is a quality that every human being possess. Because of

this we can safely assume that although our observation is subjective , other people will agree with us. The agreeable on the other hand, is not necessarily shared by others for I do not like Yorkshire pudding! However, I am well aware that this is not universally so. We can be sure that the statement: “This is a beautiful sunset”, will be shared by all the other viewers.

What lies underneath this knowledge is something Kant calls: common sense or **sensus communis**. Common sense is grounded in the free interplay between our rational faculty and our imagination. It starts with an observation that gives us an emotion. The emotion interacts with the mind in a way that is free, meaning neither one determines the aesthetic judgment but they do influence one another. This is called the pure aesthetic judgment

My observation that art is capable of addressing us on a purely sensory level leads me to conclude that, for Kant, judging is a human need. Any emotion that is exclusively sensory would be considered uncivilized, or even bestial.

Hannah Ahrend, a modern political thinker, sees our capacity to judge as crucial for humanity. She places the action of judging within the political domain: an activity between humans that is defined by plurality. [5] This activity, reserved solely for humans, is reflected in our civilized world. High art is part of civilization; an artist needs the action of judging.

It is my belief that with the need to distinguish ourselves from animals or even 'the animal within', we minimize the importance of the sensory emotion. However, it is this emotion that lies at the very base of our capacity to experience beauty.

1.2.2 The fundament of the aesthetic *judgment*

The activity of judging is controlled by the assumption that we possess the ability to do so. In everyday life we pass judgment routinely and in most cases even without us being aware of it. We are able to judge by the help of 'concepts' of our mind. These are a priori models and categories of thinking, like time and space for instance.

When it comes to pure beauty, like we see with K. Gibran, there is no concept, no model that we can apply for our judgment. The second term that says 'without understanding' implies that there is no concept for understanding beauty. We can only appreciate beauty if we are aware of its purposiveness. That allows for the feeling that beauty is not coincidental.

We experience pure beauty when all four conditions are met, but Kant also distinguishes what he calls: dependent beauty. Dependent beauty occurs when not all four conditions are met. In that case we do have a concept but that concept does not define our experience.

So how, if there is no concept of the mind, do we reach a universal, common statement about beauty, as is defined in the fourth term? Kant takes the view that human beings all have a feeling for beauty and that this functions in the same way for everybody. At its foundation lies our feeling of pleasure and feeling of aversion. Although this is the case, these feelings have to be connected to disinterestedness, as we have seen in the first term.

This is a stumbling block, the idea that these feelings can ever be truly without interest. It is in human nature I think, to avoid feelings of aversion and to prolong feelings of pleasure. Theoretically it is possible to disconnect the feeling from the subsequent action. This requires looking at a human being as a rational being with feelings who is capable to let ratio prevail over emotion (a view embraced by thinkers from the Enlightenment). I believe man to be an emotional being with a mind. This, it seems to me, is the most important reason why artists like myself will always be involved in giving shape to beauty.

The aesthetic judgment separates itself from other judgments because it is formed by a harmonious balance between the imagination and the mind. Unlike in other judgments, there are no restrictions and this ensures the necessary freedom that allows for this balance to occur. Restrictions do apply in case I want to judge if an object is a bicycle: I have to limit myself to the object. Such limitations do not apply to the aesthetic judgment, mind and imagination are without limits. An artist needs this freedom. Imagination and cognitive abilities make it possible to design a ghost regardless of the knowledge that no such thing exists.

The harmony that establishes itself due to this free interplay between the mind and the faculty of the imagination leads to the **idea** of pure beauty. This archetype, implicit in our aesthetic judgment, has its origin, according to Kant, within our reason. Kant defines reason as a faculty that transcends the mind and the senses. Reason allows for a moral coherency in our complete body of knowledge and ideas, our intellectual and emotional life. Reason, by nature, is metaphysical and for that reason brings unity to our aesthetic judgment and makes it universal.



Peter Bremers

Iceberg, 2004

Peter Bremers is an artist who succeeds in creating with his shapes an atmosphere that allows for a direct and intense aesthetic experience. His Icebergs are not merely an imitation of nature. Within the atmosphere a space is created, wherein a spectator is able to let go of rational thoughts and fully experience the sensory impression. An experience that approaches the sublime. This goes beyond the attraction of a pretty piece of glass. His work also shows why, for the aesthetic judgment, there is no distinction between beauty in art and beauty in nature.

1.2.3. Dependent beauty

As our human ability to judge is common and universal, so is the judgment of taste that lies at the core of this ability. This is so for the pure judgment of taste, the pure aesthetic judgment and pure beauty. Kant considers music (without song) to be pure beauty. What we experience is only form, we do not need knowledge nor understanding or goal to appreciate what we hear.

Dependent beauty, as opposed to pure beauty, invokes our intellectual capacities. For instance, if the Beatles were to sing pure gibberish it would be likely for our cognitive ability to fall short and the song would not stir our fantasy. In case our feelings of pleasure are raised by the good or morally right, again we are unable to reach the pure aesthetic judgment. According to Kant, dependent beauty occurs in case one or more of the four terms are not met, and neither mind nor reason are the defining factor for the experience of beauty.

In anticipation of my research into modern functional beauty, I find that this beauty is defined by rational concepts. Beauty is a tool, a means to an end, the goal being sensationalism.

I think it is almost impossible to shape pure beauty without some element of dependency. Music as a medium for shaping is really different in that the artwork is not material matter. For sculptural art to be experienced without the actual form, would be contradictory to the sensitive awareness. An aesthetic experience would be impossible. As an artist I consider my work successful if it provides the most direct connection between form and experience. Ideally, the shape has everything in it to ensure the aesthetic enjoyment.

1.2.4. The sublime

The same four conditions that apply to the aesthetic judgment of beauty also apply to the sublime. However there are differences too. Kant says that our experience with the sublime starts with a feeling of awe and of being overwhelmed. Fear and dread can cause this feeling but so can delirious joy. We are unable to cope rationally, the experience transcends this. The mind is not involved here, but reason is.

In the second instance there is non the less an agreeable feeling, one that inspires even! Kant draws the conclusion that in this case a free interplay between feeling and reason takes place as opposed to the free interplay between feeling and mind that is involved in the aesthetic judgment

This would mean that any judgment about art that transcends the ratio would be by definition a moral judgment. Reason is where our moral awareness comes from so any judgment based on reason would be a moral judgment. Because of the free interplay however, reason can not determine the judgment Art enriches our moral senses but morals can not dictate art.

Moral sense plays a part in how society judges art non the less. People are immediately roused if even the thought of a possible killing of a goldfish is declared art. Overstepping moral boundaries shocks us all. But, in breaking down these boundaries, a new and free interplay could be evoked in the spectators between feeling and reason. So why would that be a bad thing? Why do we wish to set standards on art? Being shocked is not a pleasant experience to anyone of us. Human beings try to avoid unpleasant feelings as part of our survival strategy. Although Kant was not in favor of restrictions when it comes to art, truth be said that, in his days, even the bad was depicted beautifully. The old alliance between beauty and the good or the sublime and even the divine has shifted into a new alliance wherein beauty has been replaced by ugliness and violence. Performance artists like Marina Abramovic show us a delirious violence that may well give us a sensation of the sublime while at the same time questioning our moral values.

Another difference between the sublime and beauty is the fact that beauty presents itself in a shape whereas the sublime, by it's nature, is without form. The sublime is simply too big -in the case of a starry sky for instance- and too powerful -like the forces of nature-. Our minds are unable to give a shape to this, we have no models that enable us to comprehend a force of nature. In the English language a natural disaster is synonymous for an act of God! The sublime confronts us with the limitations of our mind. By definition no sensory shape is given and that makes the experience of the sublime not only above sensory but it also transcends our cognitive faculty. It can only exist as an idea that we can form by reason.

Artists try and give shape to the sublime and enable us to experience a sensory perception of it. Kant believes this is only possible in a symbolic way because art is not an imitation of nature. When it comes to love, grief and joy, symbolic representation is all we have. In our experience of beauty and the aesthetic judgment, Kant made no distinction between nature and art. However, the sublime leads us to his theory on art. Kant wonders how art is created.

1.2.5 Kant and art

In order to investigate the origin of art Kant introduces the **aesthetic idea** and the **artistic genius**. [7] The artistic genius of the artist is able to create a bridge between reason and imagination. Reason is where the aesthetic idea comes into existence. Like the rational idea springs from the mind, so is the aesthetic idea formed by reason. There are no rational concepts or laws by which art is created but an artwork is shaped according to a concept.

This seems a paradox, and it is not the only paradox Kant has to come to grips with. Namely the fact that art should look natural even though it is man-made. An artwork may not be present in nature, but if it looks artificial, it does not convince us. Art that looks like it is thought up shows that it has its origin in the mind. Then, the mind is the determining factor which is against the second term..

Kant believes the artists talent, which he calls genius, makes it possible for the artist to give 'soul' to the artwork. A work of art may answer to the rules of taste but may nonetheless be without soul. The work is not 'alive', it is only shaped material. An artwork is the beautiful form of an aesthetic idea, an idea that transcends form but nevertheless could not be presented in any other way. Words like 'soul' and 'life' refer to something that is difficult to describe. As abstract symbols they are above sense, but in some obscure way we can see it in an artwork, and it is real to us. The soul of the artwork is hidden within that same artwork. Only a work of art can reveal the difference between art with soul and soulless art. It seems Kant shifts his focus to the object after all.

At this point Kant and Heidegger affect one another and this is one reason why I called their theories complementary. Together they make a story that is more complete because object as well as subject are taken into account. As artist, I am responsible for making the object that will lead the spectator to an aesthetic experience. Without subject the object can never be art. Art that has not been made public is like sound that is not heard or nourishment that cannot sustain life. And though I need the public, the spectator does not determine my art.

Kant refutes these paradoxes by saying that there are two ways in which the aesthetic idea can en-soul an artwork:

First, by the use of **aesthetic characteristics** that call up an additional and associative stream of thought. The same expansion of thought occurs in a visual presentation of the infinite, the unmeasurable or the incomprehensible as we know it from the sublime. Take for instance love or death. Any presentation by an artist is bound to be incomplete. Be that as it may, it is the way by which the aesthetic idea evokes a free interplay of imagination and reason. The interplay settles into a harmony that gives us a feeling of pleasure and delight in the same way beauty in nature does.

The artists genius dictates the rules that apply in bringing the aesthetic idea to life in an artwork. Not even the artist knows where they come from. According to Kant, what lays at the base is originality. This is the second way to en-soul an artwork.

This work of Paul McCarthy, Santa Claus, shows originality as well as aesthetic qualities. Still, it lacks something vital, I think, something that would keep me interested after the initial surprise wears off.



Santa Claus , 2007

Gerrit Komrij writes in *NRC Handelblad* (16 October 2008) about McCarthy and this work, which he calls *Kabouter Buttplug*: “ If it wasn't for the stories, nor the steel plated comments by the art critics , nor the docile idolization of the museum directors, you could have a good laugh over these gnomes with their oversized anal stoppers”.

One year later, Sandra Smets in *NRC Handelblad* (10 July 2009) writes about the 'inflatables' made by the same artist: “ McCarthy fits an American tradition that started in the sixties as Pop Art. Uncritically enlarging consumption goods was, at the time, considered an innovatory statement about 'high' and 'low' culture and it has ever since come up in many different varieties. That includes the inflating of objects, meters high, like Claes Oldenburg did in those days with cakes and hamburgers. Pop Art and more contemporary variations are doing -or did- well with the fast stockbrokers who like big, bold and colorful, photogenic, work. Content is not really important. This applies to Jeff Koons' gigantic balloon dogs as well as McCarthy's spectacular inflatable art. As extreme enlargements of a consumptive culture, these artworks are bigger, shinier, more seductive. And even more meaningless”.

Indeed they are funny and original but for me there is something lacking. McCarthy's work proves to me that originality without soul does not last. Once the surprise is gone there is not much more to the work, except for the rational concept behind it. I can relate to the rational thought but the fact remains that the work cannot keep me fascinated. I miss something that Heidegger in his philosophy describes as 'the happening of truth'. This special feature of an artwork shows me the soul of that work more so than originality or the arousal of associative thoughts that are the source

of en-soulment as Kant sees it.

I do recognise soul in the work called 'Hurt Models' by Christiaan Bastiaans. Here, you can see originality and the use of qualities that bring about associative thoughts, but there is more. This work reveals something genuinely essential and it does so through a beauty that hits and moves me.



Christiaan Bastiaans 'Hurt Models' (Kröller-Muller Museum 2010)

1.2.6 Autonomy

The talent that enables an artist to make art is, according to Kant, making its own rules but it is not not restricted by laws. The Greek word 'auto nomos' means 'proper laws'. These laws are not general, they apply only for the creation of one specific work. The artist sets these rules by the use of originality that comes forth from his own creativity. They are not defined by culture, history or education, They are **autonomous** rules, free of laws.

In that respect is the artist's genius autonomous by Kant's vision. The rational mind with its models and concepts is not the determining factor. However, the artist is in possession of that knowledge and Kant does not deny this at all. As I stated before in paragraph 1.1 his viewpoint is, that a human being, through the sensory experience, feels first and subsequently reaches an aesthetic judgment by a free interaction of emotion and mind.

Kant sees the purest form of autonomy in the beauty of music. In music neither the artist nor the audience has a need for a concept. No 'a priori' model or concept is necessary to have an aesthetic experience. The fact that a rational model serves to establish the musical artwork is not in contradiction with this. And because the artwork itself is not restricted by laws it is autonomous as well. It is autonomous by the the autonomy of the artistic genius and the aesthetic idea. So again, for Kant, this is exclusively a subjective quality and not some property of the object.

Kant's autonomy applies to the artwork, the artist and the aesthetic judgment In contemporary context, the word autonomy often refers to the situation that an artwork is not commissioned or that the work can be viewed as a stand alone. This is a more narrow appreciation of the word.

Chapter two: Martin Heidegger and Beauty

Martin Heidegger, 1889-1976. German philosopher. His essay ' *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*' from 1935 deals with the essence of art. [8]



Christo & Jeanne Claude
“All our work is about freedom, joy and beauty’

The Gates (2005)

This work is not just big, impressive and colorful even though the objects are. By its appearance this artwork reveals to us the essence of the wind and of being 'whole' with the world. Through beauty it allows for us to experience this emotion of joy and freedom and I really appreciate it.

2.1 An object related approach.

Heidegger's starting point is the object, the artwork itself and in doing so he is the opposite of Kant. It is within the artwork that he finds the essential meaning of art. The essence of all things, including human beings, Heidegger calls 'Sein' which I will name here 'true being'. This true being is not an object or even a matter for these things he calls 'Dasein' which I would name 'appearance'.

Appearance is a thing, an object like an artwork is an object. But only partially, an artwork is more because it can reveal to us its true being. The essential of an appearance like an artwork is hidden within and so only the artwork itself is able to reveal it unto us. Art is capable of unconcealing what is hidden within. This is seen by Heidegger as an active happening and he calls this : **the happening of truth**. He refers to the Greek word 'aletheia' which originally means 'unconcealed'. (note that truth here has no reference to what is right or just.)

To put it differently: Heidegger is concerned with this action, this happening of truth that only the artwork can make possible and , in doing so, reveals to us its essence that lies hidden within. Heidegger does acknowledge the subjective experience but only the artwork as materialized form is capable of showing its true being, its essence. This view is characteristic for the theory of phenomenology.

As vague as this happening of truth may seem in writing , it is nonetheless rather obvious while working on a piece. I am aware that something is going on but as soon as I become aware of this my attention is diverted to what appears and how. And that's where the moment is lost and I get sidetracked from the happening. It is as if focusing on the event blurs my vision. And even trying to put it in words makes that what is being revealed to be concealed again. At this moment I am in danger of forcing my work to unconceal again and in doing so, the work gets overwrought and it is not convincing anymore. The work becomes weaker because the focus is shifted not just for me but for the spectator as well.

Only intuition can guide me here in the way Kant talks about it: as a free interaction between my imagination and my mind. This may enable me to stay as close possible to the true being, the essential of what I am working on.. This maybe is the biggest and hardest challenge because it starts all over again with each new work. For the rules only apply to the one work at hand .

When considering a work we often use the phrase “ it works ”. So what does it mean? I think it is referring to the same as Heidegger's happening of truth. It is, after all a rather silly thing to say but in all its simplicity it refers to something we all see but are so inapt to describe. Funny as it is: it works seems to work!

2.1.1 Battle between world and earth.

What now makes that this 'something' that is hidden becomes unconcealed? How does this happening of truth comes to pass? We know it is the artwork that reveals it to us but what brings forth this truth in the first place? Heidegger thinks it is there as a result of 'the battle between world and earth.'

An artwork has two characteristics: first, it brings about a **world** and second, it generates **earth**. (Do not think of the matter earth, like soil.)

Earth precedes the human being and into it a human being is thrown as a creature of time, from the moment of birth till the moment it dies. Earth is without end, immoderate yet self closing and concealing. World is enclosed in earth but strives to rise above it and rest upon it. In world we humans build our lives. World wants to expand and unfurl and distinguish itself from earth but they can never be separated. Earth supports world and world rests upon the same earth from which it lights up.

By Heidegger's choice of the word 'light' he reminds me of glass, more specific of hot glass. Transparent hot glass emits light, which is perceived by us as the color orange. Though color is light it now shows us heat, makes it possible for the eye to 'feel'. Heat that is concealed within the glass is being revealed to us by its color. We see the glass as well as the heat. As the glass cools down, the color disappears and what was unconcealed to us is hidden again. But I remain conscious of the heat even after the glass has cooled. The heat precedes the glass in some way, offering endless and immoderate potential. This makes the medium so dear to me. I am still aware of the 'memory of heat', it belongs to her materiality and I use it in my work.

World and earth are essentially different but never separated. One self closing and concealing, the other unfurling and revealing. Because they are contradictory their union is a dynamic phenomenon. There is a constant strife in which both show their true nature, their essence. The artwork allows for this strife, this battle, to take place within it and then the event of the happening of truth can come forth.

2.1.2 Truth and Beauty

Out of the blue the word 'beauty' appears in Heidegger's essay. Like a deus ex machina he brings beauty forward as “one way in which truth appears as unconcealed.”(transl.)[8,blz 355]

As said before, the artwork shows us its true being, the essence or the essential of what it depicts. It does this by revealing the happening of truth which in itself is formed as a result of the battle between world and earth.

Until something is concealed it stays in the dark . Heidegger refers to the event of becoming unconcealed as being 'illuminated' from its surroundings. However, this coming into the light belongs to what is concealed. The essential, by nature, is concealed but is brought into the light through and by the artwork. The light is connected to the work, This illuminating, says Heidegger, is beauty. So the bigger the light, the more complete the unconcealment is and thus: the greater beauty!

I am thinking back of Kant and his idea about the soul of an artwork. Soul is about essence, true being and for me this illuminated happening of truth is what I call soul. If an artwork has soul it 'looks' alive. The active revelation of truth as a result of the dynamic strife that is going on in the work reflects this. Truth, soul and beauty come together as my artistic dedication. My incentive for each new work to achieve this state of complete unconcealment and thus of ultimate beauty. Originality and aesthetic qualities, as Kant points out, are my tools to bring forth what Heidegger describes so beautifully.

Revealing truth is revealing beauty. For Heidegger beauty cannot be a purely subjective matter if it is the very artwork itself that reveals this to us. It is obvious how the two philosophers differ but what they do have in common is that for neither of them beauty is a matter of form specific features that characterize an object as beautiful.

And now it is time for a good strong espresso for how else can we stay nimble of mind to follow Heidegger into the deep realms of his fantastic mind? The reader of this is hereby invited!

2.1.3 Heidegger and autonomy

Heidegger does not use the word autonomy. He uses the phrase 'resting within itself' in relation to an artwork. Not the shape but the phenomenon is what reveals itself to the subject. In the phenomenon we recognize the truth hidden within the work. The essence rests within the work. That makes the work autonomous in the sense that it exists within its own standards.

The shape is what makes the content reality but shape only defines content in case of a useful object, a utensil. A drinking glass is not art, it contains no hidden truth. The shape is serving a need outside the object and the object does not rest within itself. It is not autonomous. Only if content is defining the form, can the true being of art reveal itself. Heidegger narrows it down even more: the more an artwork is self-serving and the more thorough and profound it breaks all human ties, the more it reveals its essence. The work then simply exists in its own right and is not an object made by a skilled artist.

Reflecting upon my own experience with glass I can honestly say that the most convincing work occurs when I do no more than set the conditions wherein the glass will form itself. Form is not a fixed parameter beforehand, it is free. But just as a painter needs some sort of carrier for his paint so does the glass artist need to apply his skills to meet the conditions needed for the glass object to come into existence. Only when the conditions are met, the opportunity arises to explore and use the freedom that comes with it. That's where truth and beauty is revealed. The artwork shows this I think, because the intrinsic beauty of the material glass alone is never able to move and convince us so much. It cannot be that the shape is only serving to show the beauty of glass, for if that were the goal, the work has no hidden truth to reveal and it would not convince as art.

I do share Heidegger's view that the medium is determinative of what is to become unconcealed obviously because it lies within the work. My personal strong point as an artist working with this medium is that I am able to 'see' what is hidden within. My artistic labor is directed towards opening up the medium so the happening of truth can take place.

Heidegger speaks of a rip or tear that comes with this opening up. This may seem a somewhat romantic notion but it does take some effort from the artist to disregard and break through boundaries in order to find the conditions necessary for the achievement of every artwork.

Autonomy in Heidegger's case is an intrinsic characteristic of an artwork that isn't related so much to social, economical or historical indifference but more so to the essence of art.

Chapter 3 Contemporary beauty.

Dave Hickey, 1939. American critic of art and culture. In 1993, he published “The Invisible Dragon, Essays on Beauty” of which a revised and expanded version was released in 2009.

All art is political, beauty has a function.

“art... is never *not* advertising and never apolitical.”[9]

Contemporary beauty shows a completely different face and not surprisingly so, because contemporary art is entirely placed within the political domain. Within this frame investigating beauty is no longer a question of what it is and how we experience beauty, but it is a question of what it does, or as Hickey puts it: “its rhetorical function in our discourse with images.”

Thus the focus of my research now shifts to the vernacular of beauty, beauty as a means to an end, functional beauty, in short; political beauty.

The term 'political', though widely spread in the art world and indeed within the Rietveld community as well, does cause some confusion. Asking students of many different nationalities what they think the term means, it becomes quite clear that the meaning of 'political' is not uniform. To people of the former Eastern bloc countries it is synonymous for party politics. English native speakers on the other hand, have a much broader understanding of the word political. To them it also means 'related to public life and public affairs'. For the Dutch it is mostly related to governmental issues -as it is stated in the dutch Van Dale dictionary-. That is why the statement 'all art is political' evokes a negative response in art students as well as art lovers because it appears to define art as governmental criticism, or related to party politics. Whenever the word 'political' is used in this thesis it is to be seen in the broader sense as 'belonging to the public domain'.

Hickey also sheds his light on the disappearance of beauty in the discourse and philosophy on art. He looks at how this came to pass and what it means for art. For me, the question what it means for beauty is even more interesting. Roger Scruton, British philosopher, says in the BBC-series on '*Modern Beauty*' (December 2009):

“... losing beauty is losing meaning of life.” So, is losing beauty in art, losing meaning of art? Fact is, beauty is now seen as a functional thing. With regard to Kant and Heidegger that implies beauty has become dependent and no longer autonomous.

3.1.1 The vernacular of beauty.

“Beauty”, Hickey writes in his essay *After the great Tsunami: On Beauty and the Therapeutic Institution,* ” politicizes the content of an artwork.”[9]

When seen as a language, as a symbol, art will bear the meaning that the viewer gives to it. That implies that an object of art is a rhetorical instrument which derives its content from the response of the subject. Any language exists by the fact that there is a sender and a receiver. Therefore, form does not necessarily lead to content so there will always exist a gap between the two. This causes friction and it is beauty that ensures, by the pleasure it brings, that the content is being looked at. Not only does it take less effort for us to look, it also helps us to embrace the content and even accept it as a social possibility. The rhetoric of beauty grants conviction to the content and gives it credibility. A beautiful content connects with our sense of moral values. Beauty makes the message believable and valuable; Beauty as a political lubricator.

Hickey believes that beauty is capable of bringing huge numbers of people to a certain conviction. As an example he takes Rafael's *Madonna of the Chair* as the message of the virgin birth. Generations of pious Catholics should have known better , he thinks.

Kant's aesthetic judgment in which there is a free interplay between feeling and mind, emotion and ratio makes the appreciations of Rafael's painting quite accountable. So in how far the viewer , by looking at the beautiful painting, is being convinced of the validity of the doctrine, I am unable to measure. Personally I think it works the other way round. The essence of believe is to let go of the mind as determining factor. Catholics might enjoy the pleasure of recognizing a fellow believer, the painter, but I dispute the idea that the beauty in this painting works as an attractant for the message. The pleasure I get from it does not lead me to accept any religious believe whatsoever.

We do enjoy the pleasure of looking at beauty and for this reason artists have used this language to confront us with what is Good and Right. Hickey comes to the conclusion that this apparently is no longer so because beauty has evolved from something undesirable to a topic that is not even spoken about at all.

Up until the nineties this was not the case. Beauty was exemplary for the corruption of the market. Art dealers, galleries, they all dealt in beauty and they couldn't care less about content. In those days beauty in art and it's pernicious influence was cause for fierce discussion.

So how did we come to burke the undesirability of beauty in art? It is beyond doubt that beauty appeals to human beings. The fact that it can be put to use and abuse is not a point of discussion it seems to me. But this may very well be exactly where it hurts, since beauty has always been in allegiance with the good and even the holy, the fact that it was used as a seductive for politically incorrect ideas has let us to distrust it from the bottom of our harts. But in loosing faith in beauty are we not killing the messenger of bad news? I believe we do. All of this is independent of Kant's pure beauty and Heidegger's happening of truth.

The seductive power of beauty is exposed in the art of Jeff Koons. His works give us an insight in that power and places beauty well within the realm of commercialism and theatrical amusement.

Sandra Smets mentioned Jeff Koons' Balloon dogs in the same breath as Paul McCarthy's art as being “without content”, empty. Koons' work on Michael Jackson is a clear example of inspired art that radiates a certain soul. Very kitschy at first glance, but a closer examination shows a great

deal of tension in the figure of Jackson which is revealed by the position of the foot. The statue discloses a harrowing emotional poverty . The absurd friendship between a man and his monkey tells me something about the essential need of a human being for companionship. This makes the content universal and it goes a lot deeper than just a comment on the business of entertainment and mass consumption. In this obviously political work, beauty is functional, yet its vernacular is used to expose the essence of the work.



Jeff Koons - "Michael Jackson and Bubbles" (1988), Porcelain/ceramic blend - 42 x 70.5 x 32.5 inches

3.1.2 The Institution of Art

The art community consisting of critics, academics, museum directors, curators, officials and artists is what we call nowadays the **Institution of art**. Where did this institution come from? During the renaissance, beauty in art provided the shortest route from object to subject and in doing so, broke the hegemony of church and state. When later, the revolutionary avant-garde movement threw beauty overboard altogether it created a space for an alternative institution: the Institution of art, or so Hickey says.

The institution functions as a watchdog over the intentions of the artist and what their meaning in public, read: 'political' context. And they are not lenient when it comes to form; form is under suspicion especially if its effectiveness relies on beauty. Beauty as seductive element. Artists do better take refuge in 'honesty' on order to maintain credibility. For this reason Hickey calls it the "Therapeutic Institution" because it defends its choice by stating that art -their art- is good for our souls and beneficial to mankind as a whole. He is convinced that by denying the public the direct appeal of beauty, this institution holds its power and ultimately its job.

From now on the beautiful is taboo, something not spoken about at all. This is good logic because when the debate about beauty goes on, beauty still has power, the power to achieve changes. Thanks to the institution that holds the power to create its own heroes, beauty has lost its place within the discourse. However, Damien Hirst, one of their heroes, by brilliantly defying the limitations of that power, mocks that same institution.

With his view Hickey sheds light on the cause for the disappearance of beauty and makes it clear who benefits most from this situation. Among those who benefit are the artists, who prosper by the power and influence of the institution's warm embrace. The corruption of the market, once despised, is replaced by the corruption of the Institution.

Art educations are part of the institution of art, so no wonder the discouragement of artists to involve themselves with beauty starts here. At least in my experience. Nevertheless, I did get the distinct impression that young artists, while far from being guided by the need to produce something beautiful -and righteously so-, are still fascinated by beauty and the desire to work with it. The public also still has a need for beauty. That makes a critical approach and debate about beauty in art more necessary than ever. In a careful attempt to break the taboo Rietveld Academy organized for Studium Generale 2009 a lecture about the relevance of beauty in art under the title "New Beauty":

The hurricane of violence unleashed by human ambitions during the last century, was so overawing that there are hardly any contemporary practitioners and thinkers who are willing to speak unreservedly about beauty. Adorno's statement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is an act of barbarism" and Dutch poet Lucebert's observation that "in this age [...] beauty beauty has burned her face" are paradigmatic for the widely held belief that for any artist who sets out to contend with his own age, 'truth' is a better source than 'beauty'. Very often those who insist on their right to take pleasure by 'beauty' are branded as superficial, hedonistic and reactionary. Does this mean that the old and tested alliance between beauty and art has become completely irrelevant in the twenty-first century? [12]

Dissecting the topic turned out to be a tough job. The speakers tended to generalize and took refuge in the term 'aesthetics'. Indeed, you have to be a real trooper to willingly submit yourself to the prejudice -nurtured by ignorance- and embarrass yourself by openly declaring to be artistically challenged by pure beauty. To do so would expose an artist to the same fierce criticism that marked the controversy around Hickey's first publication of his 'essays on beauty' in 1993. Likewise, the

commotion that was caused when Damien Hirst's 'For the love of God' was exhibited in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, revealed the babel and controversy on beauty most clearly. That is why it is the perfect study case for this survey.

Clement Greenberg 1909-1994, American art critic. Best known for his essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” from 1939.

3.2 Greenberg: Autonomies of Art (1980)[10]

Lecture for the *Moral Philosophy and Art Symposium*, Mountain Lake, Virginia, October 1980.

Greenberg takes the view that we can and should appreciate art in a place that stands on his own. To experience art, there need not be a connection to other places of experience in order to make sense of art. So, an autonomous place.

He takes it even further by stating that we can only do justice to the aesthetic experience if we enter this autonomous place and observe art only for itself: 'art qua art'. Meaning art should be seen free from political, social, economical, religious or moral connections.

In this day and age a daring statement, but in other areas, such as science, we do this 'bracketing of' in order to be able to investigate more thoroughly and we think that is appropriate. For Greenberg, to know more about the essence of an artwork and how we experience that artwork, it is essential for us to look at art as standing on its own, within its own autonomous frame.

Greenberg asks us, the viewer, to look at art with a certain adjustment. He wants us to let go of the popular belief that art can not be fully appreciated without its broad political context. As an artist, I too, ask this of my public. Their voluntary action brings forth the space that I need to do my work, work that deals with the essence of beauty. I don't do this lightly. As a contemporary artist who wants to wrest herself free from functional beauty, I am embarrassing myself, and I become suspect in the eyes of the Institution. I become vulnerable and forced to defend myself.

According to Kant, the mind can never be the determining factor in establishing an aesthetic judgment. That would impair the free interplay between feeling and mind, emotion and ratio. Likewise, for Greenberg, the aesthetic experience, the enjoyment and appreciation of art should not be dictated by other factors. The quality of art lies therein that art enables the viewer, through his experience, to transcend life as lived. Artists in their turn, transcend lived-life in doing their work regardless of their political, moral or economical living conditions as they always have done. The fact that they are influenced by these factors is not so evident or important for the artwork that knowledge of these conditions is essential for appreciation of their art. Greenberg acknowledges the fact that artists operate against an art historical background and he is well aware that art does not exist in a vacuum yet it is able to abstract itself from life as lived.

In the light of history, it seems evident to me that art can rise above lived-life. It would be hard to imagine a time in which the Mona Lisa would be passed by only to raise questions as to why anyone could ever experience an aesthetic pleasure by looking at that painting.

Art is part of culture and culture is a driving force behind civilization. Art as civilizing force can only work, according to Greenberg, if it is not made for that purpose. Art is not a means, not an instrument for societies political nor moral purposes. He believes art works best if it serves only itself. The self serving nature of art resonates with Heidegger's philosophy of the artwork that rests within itself. Art as an autonomous given. This ensures the true aesthetic experience of the artwork. Greenberg says: “When it does that, art is morally, politically and socially indifferent.

In these days art is being justified by art theory and philosophy, as it once was by beauty and church. Greenberg's plea for autonomy is valid and necessary. As tempting as it may be to judge art by socio-historical standards, it does not do justice to art. An insight that came to him after many years of practice, Greenberg says.

Duchamps' Urinoir (1917) can not be seen separated from its historical, philosophical and social context.



*It is being said that Duchamps wanted to ridicule the art of his contemporaries and to show how crazy the art world had become. For **Urinoir** to be seen subsequently as an icon in the battle against the power of galleries and museums and questioning the legitimatizing of art, he could not have foreseen. However, whatever way we look at it, without the political context this is just a piss pot. The work is not autonomous in the sense that the viewer will not be able to understand the work without some understanding of the developments in the art world*

As an artist who wants to highlight autonomous beauty , the way Kant and Heidegger intended it, it is imperative to acknowledge the awareness for art to be able to exist in an autonomous frame as a valid alternative. I have to claim that autonomous place. But I do appreciate this work by Duchamps and I would advocate for a coexistence of the political artistic approach and the autonomous, to be valued and appreciated side by side.

It can be concluded that Greenberg brings the aesthetic experience, form and content, subject as well as object under the nominator of autonomy. Any different approach would lead to a distraction of the essence of art.

Chapter 4: Damien Hirst: For the Love of God.

British artist Damien Steven Hirst (1965) released 'For the Love of God ' in 2007. It is a platinum cast of a human skull, that was dated somewhere between 1720 en 1810. The platinum skull is covered with 8601 diamonds, the most striking pear shaped diamond is placed on the forehead. The individual's original teeth are placed back into the cast. [13]

The work is a reference to the art tradition of the Memento Mori –remember that you must die-. Within this tradition, the skull is the outspoken symbol of the vanitas which stands for vanity, emptiness, mendacity and the futility of financial gain. Death is a recurring theme in Hirst's work or rather the Idea of death. In his own words: “Death is inactive, it's all over, but the Idea is alive and active.” In relation to his work he says: “That's why my works are not really about death, they are about life”. [14] What he means by this becomes clear when you read the title of his work: *'The Physical Impossibility of death in the Mind of Someone Living'*, a tiger shark on formaldehyde of 1991.

Hans den Hartog Jager interviews Damien Hirst on the occasion of the exhibition of the skull in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. [15]. He wants to know from Hirst how he came by the idea for this skull . Hirst response is: “I did previous work with skulls and death. In this case it happened also because I own a house in Mexico and there I came into contact with Aztec skulls – which are beautiful. It may as well have something to do with a certain turning point in my life. I was always the young, talented, controversial artist, but now I have three kids and I started to realize that maybe I have more life behind me than I have before me. That's why I decided to celebrate life and say: *to hell with death*. And what better way to do this that cover death with riches, with life?” [14]

Damien Hirst's aim is to touch people emotionally, it makes him happy. “It is”, he says “a visual experience and that experience should inspire a kind of excitement.” He sees art as medicine to make you feel good again, for it is never his intention to come across as lurid or pessimistic. It is okay to cause a havoc but the artwork is the most important and that's how it should be, sensation should not prevail. He does not want provocation to the extent that it takes away the attention from the message. If that happens, if he overreaches, people will pass a moral judgment instead.

Hirst considers it very important that the diamonds are approved of, he obviously does not want to carry any blame. It tells me, he consciously and deliberately distances himself and the artwork from the political context that diamonds are associated with. Hirst's motifs for making this work make clear that the skull carries no political meaning.

Nevertheless, the game he plays with it is political without a doubt. A game that can be seen as an artwork in itself, which has an impact on the art world very similar to the work of Duchamps.

4.1 My aesthetic experience.

Damien Hirst's skull was to be exhibited in the Rijksmuseum by the end of 2008 and soon it was cause for mixed feelings on every level of the art community. I read about it and I saw the posters; This concerned an object of great beauty, made by a famous artist and I was eager to go and see for myself.

Here I was at the museum, waiting in line with a lot of other people. I observed my fellow visitors, a group of school children, middle aged and young people, man and woman, in short: "That skull appeals to us all", as Wim Pijbes said in an interview in NRC handelsblad [16]

A separate, dark room was erected in the museum. The total darkness in the small corridor that led to the skull took me by surprise. No orientation was possible anymore and I put out my hand to touch the wall. I was surprised but it amused me as well. I wondered if some people, like small children, would feel rather uncomfortable in this situation. It heightened the anticipation, yet it also made me fully aware of the fact that this was the explicit wish of the artist. This approach to the artwork was done on purpose, a conscious choice.

And there stood the object of my exited anticipation! A short pang of disappointment: it was so small. As I approached the skull I became suddenly aware that here before me stood the cast of what had been at one time a true human being. With that, death came really close: this person lived but now he was dead. This knowledge was an unexpected and overpowering sensation in my mind and I did not even see the diamonds. Sure, there was a sparkling light in the dark. I walked around it towards the back of the skull. The diamonds were much more present here, obviously because the facial characteristics are in the front. The dead man faded, the diamonds came to the forefront of my perception.

I distanced myself a little bit, more people were present of course, who wanted a closer look. Again, I stared the skull in the face. The outrageous diamond on its forehead dehumanized the skull defining it as a mere object once again. I looked at the other people's reactions. Some were quite violent, one woman couldn't stop laughing. Things became rather hilarious when the people present started going round in circles, eyes fixed on the skull, like a litter of puppies round their manger. My attention turned towards the technical aspects of the presentation and the actual realization of the object. My curiosity satisfied, my perception shifted once more.

I concentrated on my feeling of the the skulls presence. The beauty of it became overwhelming, in some way too much to take in, I couldn't wrap my mind around all that was happening. One thing stood out however; I was staring death straight in the face. Memento mori, I thought, and it dawned on me that the sheer fact of loosing your money in death is completely unimportant. What is important is that, in death, we cannot take beauty with us. Death robs us of the one thing that each of us is given in life: the ability to experience beauty. Beauty, in all its spiritual richness, is available to all human beings even under the most unexpected circumstances. People in concentration camps tell of experiences of great beauty enriching them even in these dreadful conditions.

I did need time. A good artwork asks for a certain effort on the spectator's side, genuine attention and willingness to explore. For reasons of security and organization this was not given to most visitors. By blending into the background I managed to prolong my stay in the sanctuary but that makes the presentation a complete failure. If people can't get the time they need you might just as well not exhibit the piece.

Reflecting upon my personal experience, I clearly recognize the interplay between feeling and ratio and, ultimately, between feeling and reason. I was aware of something hidden and yet revealed, in short: I experienced the 'happening of truth'.

4.2 The critics and the skull

As I mentioned before, the exhibition at the Rijksmuseum was cause for critical comments from the public, art historians, critics, museum directors and artists.

The skull leaves nobody untouched and the fierceness of the reactions is striking, often even without having seen the work. I will limit myself to the reactions here in the Netherlands (there are many to be found on the internet), more specifically to those of Wim Pijbes, director of the Rijksmuseum, Cyrille Offermans, writer and essayist, Rudi Fuchs, art critic and former museum director and Hans den Hartog Jager, writer and essayist.

Let me start with Hans den Hartog Jager. He wrote a critical yet positive essay on Hirst and his work and a short interview with Damien Hirst, which were both published in *Oog* magazine, a publication of the Rijksmuseum.[15] His opening: "Damien Hirst's work is a brilliant manipulation of art and the media, but also a genuine monologue intérieur about life, death and fame".

It is interesting that den Hartog Jager adds fame to the list. Fame, achieved by Hirst by never actually giving away the game, by carefully building an image as the 'elusive' artist. Nevertheless, Den Hartog describes Hirst's fascination with death, money, religion and art, sincere. Is Hirst fascinated by money? This does not appear to be the case so much, for when den Hartog asks him if he was excited by the idea that he was influencing the diamond market by making his art work, Hirst answers rather indifferent: "Mwah. I doesn't mean as much to me as when the work really touches someone emotionally."

According to den Hartog, Hirst's fascination for death and fame are connected. He believes Hirst needs fame to become immortal and the way to achieve this is not by making art that lasts for eternity, but by 'getting into people's heads'.

I am unable to agree with this viewpoint. Artists are being remembered for their work but I know of no great name from the past who has become immortal as a person in people's heads, while no one remembers anything about what that person did. The kind of fame den Hartog aims at has to do more with stardom, I think, and Hirst certainly has some of that. But stardom fades away quickly. Attaining stardom by cutting off your ear will attract attention and an interest in your work but if the work stinks you will be left with only one ear.

Cyrille Offermans has a thing or two to say about stardom. His writings are laced with fierce comments on Hirst, his work and Wim Pijbes.[16] He sees something painful in the way the museum tried to meet the terms for exhibiting and, what he calls: a pop star's wish list. Offermans blames Hirst for not being a critical artist. A critical artist would include the political context of the diamond trade in his presentation. He compares Hirst's presentation to that of a sanctuary showing a religious cult object. The policy of the museum to show the old masterpieces from their collection no longer as autonomous works but within their political context, is in flagrant contradiction with Hirst's presentation, so says Offermans.

What Offermans says here is, that in the presentation that Hirst has chosen, the work is presented as an autonomous work. If this is the case then Hirst asks of us explicitly to look at this skull detached from political context. The question if this work can be seen as autonomous art becomes a crucial one. One that I will try to answer by putting the theory next to the practice in the next paragraph.

To Offermans, the political context of this vanitas would be the gaudy scenes of the Millionaires Fair with its display of exorbitant wealth. He writes: "Obviously, both artist and director would rather exhibit the skull in the venerable company of the famous old vanitas paintings of the

Rijksmuseum..”

Mister Offermans conveniently surpasses the fact that those venerable vanitas paintings each bare witness to riches that were as exorbitant in those days. Even to the point where a typical vanitas symbol as the pepper sachet has found its way into the dutch language in the word 'peperduur' meaning as expensive as pepper.

Rudi Fuchs simply and effectively counters Offermans criticism, because his loudmouthed argument contains quite a few inaccuracies and what's more, he writes his essay before the exhibition has taken place and so the obvious reply is: “Have a look first”.[17] One of the striking aspects of the comments on the skull is the amount of anger and excitement that seems to go with it. The knighthood of morality run to arms and manipulate public opinion. The effect being, that people distance themselves from the artwork and deliberately choose not to go and have a look. Intriguing political propaganda that serves the image, enhancing ignorance.

There's a huge moral outrage. Some (glass)artists close to me find it reprehensible that an artist spends so much money on an artwork while three quarter of the world population dies of hunger, poverty and sickness. This seems odd to me. Thinking along this line, you'd better shut down the furnace because by itself it uses more energy in a day then a four person household in a month.. So what's the excitement really about: the money or a denial that springs from a primitive reaction out of fear of death?

Hirst says he wants to send the skull on a tour because in reality it looks much 'nicer', much more positive. Exactly this prompts Rudi Fuchs to naming the skull the anti-vanitas. The skull, as the ultimate symbol of the inescapability of death, has now itself becomes an almost indestructible object of eternity. “To hell with death”.

Mark how Rudi Fuchs calls beauty one of Hirst's themes but is reluctant to use the word in relation to the work or his personal aesthetic experience. He speaks of a 'glorious' object. I believe this to be significant of the taboo that accompanies beauty. Wim Pijbes dared to say it and he was ridiculed because of it.

Oh well, it won't be long before it is considered bold to declare an artwork beautiful. Just wait and see...



F.Sant-Acker, 17 th century

Presenting all the exorbitant riches: the Persian carpet, the Nautilus beaker, citrus fruits and bottom right: the pepper satchet. Death is never far as is depicted by the fallen wineglass and the half peeled lemon but, thankfully, there is also resurrection: the butterfly in the top right corner.

4.3 Art theory and the skull

Offermans says Hirst is not a critical artist but it seems to me he missed Hirst's point of criticism. The vanitas is to be seen as a warning against emptiness and vanity and the absurdness of pursuing financial gain in the face of death. Exactly that is what Hirst's work is about only, sachets of pepper will not carry the same message nowadays. These days ask for a huge, really huge display of wealth to demonstrate the same idea.

But Hirst goes even beyond that. In becoming part of the financial powers-that-be he questions the whole economical context of art. An artist who becomes the co-owner of his own valuable artwork keeps the power to manipulate and influence the art market even after the work is sold. Irony has it that '*For the Love of God*' has become a glorification statue for the free market system which is dictated by the rule: Money equals Power.

This apparent contradiction defines Hirst's work. In an interview with Noemi Smolik, *Kunstforum nr. 191* he indicates contradiction to be part of life. He states: "that is why I do not want to show decisions with my work...everything you see in my work is true, it depends on your own perspective." [14]

Hirst is now himself one of the players in the field of art speculators and he has access to the power over the commercial art market that comes with it. The institution of art -the same institution that David Hickey aims his wrath at- proclaimed Damien Hirst one of its heroes but in doing so has cherished a viper at its bosom. By taking his new work directly to the auction market, Hirst set aside the entire art world. This is where the real world makes her move: Sothebys' shares crash landed, the distance between art and society was minimalised. Museum directors, critics, gallerists, academics, all stood by and watched. Pijbes remarks: "How interesting, even on that level you can make art." [18] Sotheby as part of a political artwork.

Damien Hirst, by his actions, proves to be an undisputed political animal. But what would be only business if conducted by any speculator, in his case can easily be seen as an artwork. What about the object itself, the skull, is it to be seen in the same light? Can '*For the Love of God*' still be looked at as an autonomous artwork? To answer that question I will hold it to the philosophical and critical viewpoints that I discussed in previous chapters.

For Kant, an artwork is autonomous because the aesthetic idea and the artist's genius are autonomous. The aesthetic idea is brought forth by a free interplay between reason and imagination. It is free because the laws that define the artwork spring from originality. It enables the artist to ensoul the work.

How original is the vanitas, this typical cliché in art history? The rhetoric of the skull isn't original, its adornment with earthly wealth is a political given. Nevertheless, this is only the blueprint by which the object was made. According to Kant, the use of symbols and associations are the tools by which the artist shapes the aesthetic idea. The ensoulement transcends this concept but can nevertheless be presented in no other way. The work is made but it does not look constructed (something Hirst was not so sure of himself, when he started out making the work, because he seriously considered the possibility of ending up with a kind of 'glittery disco ball'). Considering all things this skull may be, it is also a work that exists within its own norms, it is autonomous in the sense of Kant.

The medium, the materiality of the artwork, is what reveals the content, the essence. Not because content dictates form but because form incorporates the conditions by which content can manifest itself. The essence of the skull, its true being, is shown by the work and only the work. So the work rests within itself, it is autonomous in the sense of Heidegger.

For all human beings a skull is a symbol of death and a reminder that we are mortal. This is common knowledge. That makes the symbolism of the skull universal and with that, free from historical, social and even religious context. Autonomous.

The skull's beauty is definitely functional. The abundance of diamonds -the ultimate attractant- that Hirst used, brought the work to everyone's attention and made it as public as anyone could wish for. And so the question remains: how autonomous is this skull?

Again, the answer lies with Hirst. It lies in the way he presents the work. Through his presentation, Hirst creates the terms for our aesthetic judgment. And he does this deliberately by showing the piece as an autonomous object, in a dark room with no impression from outside, just the skull and the light. The four terms dictated by Kant are met exactly because of the presentation. The sensory input is the only way to judgment. Common sense is the only a priori model that we need to experience a sublime pleasure while looking at '*For the Love of God*'. The spectator needs no rational model nor political context to understand this work. You do not need to know how many carat this head is or who owns it. In the presentation of Hirst, the work is definitely autonomous. The mind is not the determining factor but you can reflect on the work rationally and there is a lot to be said about it and a lot has been said about it. It makes the work an interesting topic for discussion but that does not diminish the aesthetic pleasure many people, including me, get from it.

It is in this 'place', that Greenberg wants us to look at art. An aesthetic experience of art that is not related to other fields of experience. Only then will we experience art qua art. Art that is not subject to or abused by moral or political goals. In that autonomous field of experience beauty is art.

With this skull Hirst made a second artwork, one that carries great influence. An artwork made visible in the manipulation of '*For the Love of God*' as a commercial commodity shaped like posters, pencils, t-shirts or bike bells. (I wonder if there's an action-hero of it on the market?) An artwork made visible in the person Hirst when he participates in buying the work and influences the market. In the respectable auction house Sotheby, involuntarily participating in an artwork about commercialism and power. Some time later Hirst will try this commercial power against the power of the institution of art by offering his latest work for auctioning even before it has been shown in the gallery.

That skull is a fantastic case of two-for-one. Two artworks: one autonomous, as shaped matter; the other political, as aesthetic idea. Chapeau !

Conclusion

The bankruptcy of beauty?

Avant-garde got rid of the baby and left us with the bathwater. Beauty in art turned out to be the messenger of bad news. Declaring beauty bankrupt seemed the only way to expose her seductive betrayal. Susan Sontag states in her essay '*A lecture on beauty*' that beauty's bankruptcy is connected to the loss of confidence in our ability to judge. But the fact that humans are still emotionally touched by beauty is cause for embarrassment. Can we admit to admiring beauty? When it comes to art we prefer to speak of 'interesting'. Sontag turns the taboo around when she says: “Loosing beauty as a criterion for art does not mean beauty has lost its authority. It means that we are loosing faith that there is such a thing as art.” [19]

Beauty as seen by philosophers Kant and Heidegger is not even recognized anymore, its existence gaged. It is not the same beauty we find it in contemporary political, non-autonomous art. Functional beauty has taken its place. With his plea for autonomy Greenberg hits the mark. Only the artwork that detaches itself and rises above its political context can create the necessary space for the happening of truth. At the same time it can create a space for the public to approach the four conditions that have to be met in order to pass the aesthetic judgment. In other words: space for beauty.

Artists and art lovers are still fascinated by beauty but the confidence is lost. That is why we need to address beauty, now more than ever before. Declaring her bankrupt is simply not an option.

I started this survey with a question: what has happened to beauty in art? The meaning of beauty in relation to the essence of art has changed drastically and the place beauty takes in the field of art has become a different one. This leads me to conclude:

Beauty as aesthetic judgment and as result of the essence of art has been replaced by beauty as a functional addition to the content of an artwork.

The search for beauty has made me aware of my own position and power as an artist. I still have faith in beauty.

Finally, I agree wholeheartedly with Susan Sontag: “Imagine you'd say: That is an interesting sunset.”

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