IS BEAUTY STILL RELEVANT? IS ART? IS ARCHITECTURE?

NATHANEL COLEMAN

THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

Although notions of the good and the beautiful might seem impossible to discuss in our non-foundational age, the continuing relevance of beauty can sit comfortably alongside postfoundationalist, post-metaphysical, and generally post-modernist thought, no matter how much a tendency for slipping back into a structuralist mind-set may be evidenced. The relevance of beauty and the good are in fact paradoxically intensified when thought beyond metaphysics, not least when the practical or pragmatic value of both categories is considered. The work the beautiful and the good can accomplish in our attempts to reimagine professions and their products remains vital. For example, all efforts to wrench architects and architecture out of their moribund state might well depend on an understanding of both categories for any chance at success.1

The problematic of what the 'good architect' is, or might be, in the present epoch arises out of disciplinary doubt and reflection on poor results. Any discussion of the figure of the architect must inevitably also include a consideration of what 'good architecture' is, or might be. Nevertheless, current discourses on both tend to be strangely dissociative, as if architecture could be autonomous, or that novelty or a formalist view of architectural aesthetics is enough to preclude discussion of architecture's social dimension or the social obligations of architects—beyond the limiting perspectives of the marketplace.² Ideas of the 'good' in terms of architectural practice and its

results bedevil our capacity to judge as we waiver between ideas of radical subjectivity and absolute ideals. However, when the ethical dimension of both the good and the beautiful are recollected, it becomes possible to imagine them as bound to the fortunes of propriety, to appropriateness. Doing so is even possible today, albeit as situational, rather than absolute.

The problem of the good and the beautiful in architecture today reveals something of its intractability and thus also suggests a pathway to its solution. In an effort to rescue aesthetics from a street level conception, my interest here is the problem of beauty, more so than the problematic of thinking of aesthetics in terms of questions of beauty as 'mere beauty.' Such propositions position beauty as if it were simply a matter of 'the look of a particular object,' or were interchangeable with impulsive 'liking'; as though ideas of beauty could have no reach beyond formalist aesthetics, sensualist proclivities, or radical subjectivity.

Yet, despite its compartmentalization in recent times, the ethical dimension of beauty has persisted at least from the Greek philosopher Socrates (died 399 BC), via Plato (died 347 BC), to the Renaissance architect and theorist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), and onward from there to nineteenth century social critics John Ruskin (1819-1900) and William Morris (1834-1896), and arguably beyond them to architects Le Corbusier (1887-1965) and Aldo van Eyck (1918-1999) as well. Each was as preoccupied with the aesthetical (as a matter of beauty) as much as the ethical (as also a matter of beauty). But this only works if we think of beauty as a sense of wholeness or at least the striving toward it, as Socrates did, summarized by Alberti as 'that to which nothing may be added nor taken away but for the worse'. Perhaps surprisingly, this definition of beauty turns on an ideal of comprehensiveness that can also accommodate the parts out of which it is made. It could continue to help us to judge works of architecture, whether radical or conservative, postmodern or deconstructive, etc. Indeed, even in an epoch in which no syntonic universal ideal of beauty prevails (in which all master narratives are subject to question), the superlative aim of completeness persists as a guide to practice and as a way to judge its results alike. Only in this way could Wittgenstein's claim that 'ethics and aesthetics are one and the same' be credible.3

In order to work through the problem of beauty, to rescue it from claims of its apparent meagreness, cases for tradition and hermeneutics are made. On the one hand, the thinking of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy⁴ is a proponent of tradition and inheritor of the lineage from Plato to Morris. On the other, Gianni Vattimo,⁵ is as much intrigued



ONE KIND OF ART AND SHOCK: DANIEL LIBESKIND, TORONTO CRYSTAL

by a hermeneutics of tradition as by generalized communication and a weakening of the strong thought of western metaphysics, with its attendant inescapable propensity for violence. Vattimo and Coomaraswamy share a revaluation, or rethinking, of art that rescues beauty from being 'merely,' and as such, suggests how architects might begin to reclaim the richness of their task, albeit in a dispersed way, to act on behalf of the beautiful and ethics simultaneously, and in so doing, rescue the pervasive claims of architects to be acting on behalf of the people from being little more than empty words forming banal slogans primarily conjured up to justify simply doing business.

ART AND SHOCK: VATTIMO

In a passage that begins to confound the conventional divide between the ethical and aesthetical, Vattimo charts a pathway to enhanced encounters with art (including architecture) that do not simply move beyond the aesthetic but which are suggestive of much fuller experiences, precisely because the 'theoretical, moral, and emotional,'—the ethical—is acknowledged:

True, on the one hand, enjoying the work always implies or in some sense even comes to a head with an act of aesthetic contemplation, in which the work imposes itself by virtue of its formal perfection, without further referring to anything that might disturb the satisfaction or stillness connected with such a state.

Up to this point, Vattimo outlines a fairly conventional depiction of the nature of aesthetic experience. However, as the paragraph progresses he turns from an exclusively aesthetic understanding toward an ethical one as well:

On the other hand, it is equally true that the encounter with a great art work always represents not only an 'aesthetic' but also a theoretical, moral, and emotional experience, which engages the person at all levels and leads us to speak of art's truth, of its cosmic nature, and of its ontological meaning.

The value of the recognition outlined above lies in liberating art from a 'formalist view of beauty,' that limits understandings of it to an ideal of beauty entrapped within the 'aesthetic sphere' and thus as removed from the real, or the potential of having any significant impact on it:

Hence, in concrete experience the work resists being confined within the limits of the formalist view of beauty, it moves out of the 'aesthetic sphere' in which it is enclosed and holds its truth appeal, in the broadest and fullest meaning of the word.⁶

Art's 'truth appeal' resides in its opening up of vistas onto new worlds. Or as Vattimo puts it, "the work [of art] opens a new "epoch" of being as an absolutely originary event, which cannot be reduced to what it already was, and it grounds a new order of relationships within beings, a true and actually new world." The newness of this world, that art founds, captivates experiencing subjects of it by shocking them. Accordingly, for Vattimo the term that defines 'the encounter between the reader and the work ... is "Stoss," shock or quake: the artwork suspends in the reader all natural relationships, making strange everything that until that moment



ANOTHER KIND OF ART AND SHOCK: CALATRAVA'S QUADRACCI PAVILION

had appeared obvious and familiar.'8 It is worth noting that the 'shock' that occurs in encounters with the previously unknown that art opens up, does not necessarily have anything to do with so-called 'shock art,' which shocks in its way by referring to 'natural relationships,' rather than suspending them, and by intensifying the 'obvious and familiar,' rather than making either strange. However, it is Vattimo's description of intense encounters with art as a 'shock' that is of the greatest interest.

ART AND SHOCK: COOMARASWAMY

In his own attempts to challenge an aesthetic view of art Coomaraswamy also found it necessary to refer to 'shock' to describe an alternative. According to him, 'For the most part, our 'aesthetic' approach stands between us and the content of the work of art, of which only the surface concerns us.'9 For Coomaraswamy, the surface, apparent beauty, invites attention, but the real experiential payoff (as much emotional as intellectual) resides in getting close to the ideas that motivate the object and which it makes visible to the senses, which in turn moves, or shocks, us during our encounters with works of art. As Coomaraswamy argues, 'it is not only in connection with natural objects (such

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as the dew-drop) or events (such as death) but also in connection with works of art, and in fact whenever or wherever perception [. . .] leads to a serious experience, that we are really shaken.' Coomaraswamy uses the Pali word samvega 'to denote the shock or wonder that may be felt when the perception of a work of art becomes a serious experience,' which, of course, is quite similar to Vattimo's description of such encounters. 11

It is perhaps quite difficult for us to experience works of art in the way either Vattimo or Coomaraswamy describe encounters with it. As Kuspit suggests, the commodification of art, and the overabundant stimuli available to us through electronic and mechanical production and reproduction of art works, has made it all but impossible for us to gain access to the truth of art, or the shocking nature of this.12 Even so, most of us have had encounters with works of art that have left us moved, even shaken, and these tend to be the most memorable, because the profoundest. If even one of these experiences can be recollected, Coomaraswamy's conviction that "Samvega [shock, wonder], then, refers to the experience that may be felt in the presence of a work of art, when we are struck by it, 'as a horse might be struck by a whip' will have resonance for us."13 More so, such recollection might begin to suggest what the aim of art, its vocation ought to be (and for architecture as well): to make the world strange so that we might see it anew, in all its depth and seriousness, such that we might believe with Coomaraswamy that, "In the deepest experience that can be induced by a work of art (or other reminder) our very being is shaken (samvijta) to its roots."14

WHAT ABOUT ARCHITECTURE?

The conceit of philosophers is that architecture is, of course, an art, more so one of the fine arts, even though in practice today it would be hard to describe much of what is built in the name of architecture as having convincingly been conceived or constructed under the sign of the fine arts – to say nothing of being serious in the ways described by Vattimo and Coomaraswamy above. Rather than tangle with this issue here, I would like to consider a conception of architecture advanced by Vattimo that could suggests how it might escape from its entrapment within the logic of capitalism (with its habit for destroying communities):

[W] hat is left to legitimize our projects? Precisely those conditions of belonging ... which are disclosed as we walk around the neighbourhood and notice that there, there used to be an old store, that here, there are traces, ruins, histories.¹⁵

[A]ll that is left is to understand legitimation as a form of the creation of



SAMVIJTA AT KAHN'S KIMBELL MUSEUN

horizons of validity through dialogue, a dialogue both with the tradition to which we belong and others.¹⁶

[E] dification has two principal meanings — to build and to be morally uplifiting. Both are quite closely tied in today's rather vertiginous coming and going between architecture and philosophy... . That is, edification must be ethical, entailing communication of valuechoice. In the present situation of thought on the one hand and architectonic experience on the other ... the only possibility of edifying in the sense of building is to edify in the sense of 'rendering ethical,' that is, to encourage an ethical life: to work with the recollection of the past, with the expectations of meaning for the future, since there can no longer be absolute rational deductions. There follows then edification as a fostering of emotions, of ethical presentability, which can probably serve as the basis for an architecture determined not by the whole but by the parts. 17

The idea of architecture developed by Vattimo above is both more humble and more radical than anything coming from within the discipline of architecture, across the whole spectrum, from the most commercial practices, to those that are ostensibly avant-garde, to the apparently socially engaged as well. It is Vattimo's conception of tradition—as a common ground of belonging, dialogue, and invention—that returns thinking about architecture to ethics, which holds out the promise of a renewed relevance for architecture and beauty alike. One, however, is left wondering why architecture in these days seems all but incapable of thinking such thoughts on its own, suggesting also that at its best, philosophy could help it to do so.

THE DISEMBODIMENT OF BEAUTY

The relevance of beauty for architecture is far from spent. As 'a vision that has been a source of inspiration to all Western philosophy', perhaps Plato's definition of beauty, as developed in the Symposium, remains at the essence of understanding art and life.¹⁸ But if in the present aesthetic preoccupations can seem to limit the basic appeal of art (or architecture) to the eye (as it does music to the ear), it is here that Plato, and his commentator, Neo-Platonist philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) following him, cease to provide a way for recuperating the relevance of beauty in the present. Obviously, sight and hearing are less physically engaged than taste, smell, or touch, making the first two the obvious preference of idealists. By privileging the senses of sight and hearing to those of taste, smell, and touch Plato and Ficino severely limit the possibilities of full-bodied experience. In this regard, art critic Adrian Stokes (1902-1972) reminds us that all the senses are integral to an appreciation of both life and art. The persisting problem of Plato for art and architecture is the persistence of the idea that the highest ideal of beauty is an appreciation of it divorced from the sensuous—the body —and taken up by ideas and the mind alone. As one commentator summarizes:

From Plato comes the view of the realm of ideas set off from the world of the phenomenal which is but an imperfect copy of the archetype. This distinction corresponds to that between the material and the immaterial. In the Platonic tradition the note is persistent that the body is a clog.¹⁹

Arguably, Plato's reification of ideas transforms them into beauties lacking in objects. If the aim of creativity is beauty, understood – following Plato – as associated with the Good, it is difficult to imagine how any notion of beauty can dispense with the body as its origin. If beauty



THE EXPERIENCE OF THE 'LESSER' SENSES: TACTILE EXPERIENCE AT ANDO'S FT. WORTH MODERN

originates with notions of the body, how could a philosophy of beauty that exiles the body actually be about beauty (or perhaps even about knowledge)? If self understanding and understanding of the world begin with the body, evolving into mental contents that are transformable into symbols that make art possible, then arguably, theories of beauty that abolish the body (and with it the world of objects), are of little use to the invention and elaboration of art. Articulating just this dilemma in a critique of Greek philosophy, philosopher Ortega Y. Gasset (1883-1955) elaborates on the relation between ideas and things, the mind and the body, and thoughts and actions:

When the Greeks discovered that man thought, that there existed in the universe that strange reality known as thought (until then man had not thought, or, like the bourgeois gentilhomme, had done so without knowing it), they felt such an enthusiasm for ideas that they conferred upon intelligence, upon the logos, the supreme rank in the universe. Compared with it, everything else seemed to them ancillary and contemptible. And as we tend to project into God whatever appears to us to be the best, the Greeks with Aristotle, reached the point of maintaining that God had no other occupation but to think. And not even

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This doctrine has been given the name 'intellectualism'; it is idolatry of the intelligence which isolates thought from its setting, from its function in the general economy of human life. As if man thinks because he thinks, and not because, whether he will or not, he has to think in order to maintain himself among things We do not live in order to think ... we think in order to succeed in subsisting ... [and] surviving.²⁰

Ficino's famous commentary on Plato helps to situate Gasset's criticism of 'intellectualism'. For Ficino, the real is unreal, which encouraged his attempt to prove that the appreciation of beauty is 'highest' when incorporeal, even if language, as reality, makes the disrealization of objects all but impossible: things remain as bodies, material, and existent. The indefeasible physicality of thought and beauty renders Ficino's preference for dis-realization peculiar:

The eyes see nothing but the light of the sun, for the shapes and colors of bodies are never seen unless illuminated with light, nor do they come to the eyes with their own matter itself ... in this light, since it is separate from matter, the order is completely independent of body.²²

Above all else, the preceding negates bodily experience. It is a peculiar intellectual exercise to imagine that since light is reflected off objects, we do not actually perceive them, as they apparently do not actually exist, except as the light the eye perceives. The problem here is that even in darkness, a body, an object, even beauty, can be perceived. As a Platonist, Ficino is obligated to disregard the senses of taste, smell, and touch. In this regard, philosopher Leon Ebreo (ca. 1465- ca. 1521) described taste, smell, and touch as "the three material senses", on the other hand, he called sight and hearing "the spiritual senses". Echoing Plato and Ebreo, Ficino writes;

Love is the desire for enjoying beauty, Love is always limited to the [the pleasures of] the mind, the eyes, and, the ears. What need is there of the senses of smell, taste, and touch? Odors, flavor, heat, cold, softness, hardness, and the like qualities are the objects of these senses. None of these is human beauty, Since these qualities are simple, and human beauty of the body requires a harmony of various parts. Love regards as its end the enjoyment of beauty; beauty pertains only to the mind, sight, and hearing. Love, therefore, is limited to these three, but desire which rises from the other senses is called, not love, but madness.²⁴



THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BODY: PETER ZUMTHOR'S VALS BATHS

THE RETURN TO EMBODIMENT

Ficino's idealism (as introduced in preceding section) turns on an impoverishment of experience that if operative would deprive us of our appreciation of flowers, food, and lovemaking - to say nothing of buildings and dancing - as expressions of beauty and as pathways toward different and deeper understandings of the world, ourselves, and others. Further, as much as beauty may derive from a divine sense of goodness, it also comes from an appreciation of the natural world, of landscape, and the body. A deep appreciation of the beauty of each of these things requires the senses of 'odors, flavor's, heat, cold, softness, and like qualities', not to mention 'sight and hearing.' Any conception of the experience of beauty, or of anything else that rejects the fullness of the senses inevitably permits only a partial experience of the world. In contradistinction, Stokes takes up an argument for the body in his work on Michelangelo (as elsewhere in his writing):

It is likely that images of the body belong to the aesthetic relationship with every object; emotive conceptions of physique are ancient in us; awareness of our own identity has always been upon the flesh; the outer world of objects was conceived in the first place as an extension of our bodies. This early view,

of course, bears no resemblance to an adult impression. But art tends to return some of the way back to the sources of feeling and perception.²⁵

Stokes consistently argues for the corporeality of art and for an art of intensity embodying total outward expression. Well-versed in most aspects of his subject, Stokes also turned his attention to what he believed were some of the questionable aspects of Platonism, Renaissance theory, and Neo-Platonism:

Stress upon mathematics, both in the case of Alberti; and Piero, by itself explains nothing of their art. Similarly Platonism, Neo-Platonism, was but a necessary garment, the cover of nameless joy in things; paradoxically, since the philosophy of Plato is far from the senses, allowing no more value to the sensible world than to the individual, that other God of Renaissance man.²⁶

Despite Stokes' observations, it might be reasonable to conclude that neither philosophies of beauty nor objects of beauty any longer occupy the center of considerations of art or culture. This modern condition arguably begins with the advent of science as we know it and with the secularization of society. In the West, this new condition parallels the loosening of the Church's temporal powers and the rise of industrialization, and began to take definitive shape during the late Seventeenth century.

The separation of mind and body that persists throughout philosophies of beauty, originates the crisis of meaning in art and architecture that continues to persist. Plato's model is of man ascending from earthly conceptions to heavenly ones. At a certain moment of elevation the process requires transcendence in the form of disengagement of the mind from the body, of ideas from reality, with ideas ultimately taking precedence over objects and the experience of them. Gasset considers the modern manifestation of this tension between ideas and objects as follows:

Under the name Reason, then of Enlightenment, and finally of culture, the most indiscreet deification of the intelligence were effected. Among the majority of the thinkers of the period ... culture [and] thought ... came to fill the vacant office of a God who had been put to flight.²⁷

The desire to liberate the mind from the body, in order to free ideas, was acceptable, if filled with foreboding, so long as all-knowing continued to be tied a-priori to the body. These ties were both effected and supported by a sense of God, that concept above man, and deriving from us, which once promised to keep the human world from descending into chaos. Without



THE BODY SURROGATE: SENSUAL FORM AT NORMAN FOSTER'S SAGE GATESHEAD

such a conception we are on our own. The more the emergence of the *Modern World* is explored, the more the loss of *God* has left moderns flailing about for something to hold on to, and for something to bind us to the earth. God, once perceived as the center of *all* and the origin of Love, and therefore of beauty, creativity and human beings, was reason enough for virtuousness. Without the comforting anchors of God and religion—which gave purpose to art and architecture over and above what the state could provide—enlightened moderns are left wondering how we could have ever lived with God, and simultaneously how it could be possible to live without Him (Her), despite the many horrors justified in the name of religion.

With the advent of *reason* and the victory of *ideas*, humans have become ever more estranged from those parts of thought that were once bound to love, beauty, goodness, and personal conceptions of God; ties that were, often enough, the source and justification for humane character. Reification of ideas, and the deification of them that followed, greatly concerned Gasset, who intuited the extreme danger of such operations, in particular leading to the dehumanization of art: "The idea instead of functioning as the means to think an object with, is

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CONCLUSION

Philosophers of beauty have often seen beauty as a means to an end – the conduit from earthly to divine love. For most, moving from the corporeal to the incorporeal must follow one route: from the feet to the head. So long as ideas about ideal beauty proceeded along this route, *lesser* sensual forms deriving from the body had a place. The heady—at times earthy—sensuality of the body, and its manifold references could still find a place in thoughts about art and beauty, without apparently contradicting ancient philosophy.

However, the dominance of absolute reason, with its corollaries of quantification and abstraction has loosened connections between *real* and idealized beauty. Paradoxically, as thinking and making drift skyward to the realm of pure *forms* (pure ideas) desire has become dissociated from attainable objects (including from the body): a disconnection intensified by the increasing dominance of screen time in everyday life, which inevitably atrophies the senses other than seeing and hearing. Mind dissociated from body, ideas from reality, and the spirit from the everyday, encourages scientistic thought processes disconnected from the sensuous reality of persons, and things. Ultimately, recuperating the relevance of beauty for inventing art and architecture, no matter how irrelevant they may appear, turns on rekindled awareness, "that memory helped reality to retain the things received by the five senses."

Although 'the five senses and memory' have largely been outsourced to virtuality and digital data, Voltaire's pronouncement in *Memory's Adventure* is even more relevant today than when first published in 1775. Mnemosyne's admonishment in the story is especially apropos: "Imbeciles I forgive you; but this time remember that without the senses there is no memory, and without memory there is no mind." The dominion of thought processes masquerading as scientific, as if objective, measurable, and uncontaminated by emotion calls out for a rejoinder; recollecting beauty and its mirror in the body would be a good place to start.

ENDNOTES

- 1. A condition adeptly theorized by Manfredo Tafuri (1935-1994), amongst others.
- 2. Autonomy is a fallacy I will leave aside for the moment.
- 3. Wittgenstein, L. [1921] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Abdingdon: Routledge, 2001. §6.421, p. 86.
- 4. Coomaraswamy was born 1877, Columbo, Ceylon died 1946, Needham,

Massachusetts

- 5. Vattimo was born 1936, Palermo, Italy
- 6. Gianni Vattimo, Art's Claim to Truth (New York: Columbia, 2008), p. 158.
- 7. Ibid., p. 152.
- 8. Ibid.
- 9. A. K. Commaraswamy, 'Samvega, "Aesthetic Shock," Harvard Journal of Aesthetic Studies, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1943), n. 2, p. 174.
- 10. Ibid., p. 176.
- 11. Ibid., p. 174.
- 12. Donald Kuspit, 'Secrets of Success: Paradoxes and Problems of the Reproduction and Commodification of Art in the Age of the Capitalist Spectacle,' Available online at: http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/art-and-capitalist-spectacle2-8-11.asp (Accessed 09 May 2012).
- 13. A. K. Commaraswamy, 'Samvega, "Aesthetic Shock," Harvard Journal of Aesthetic Studies, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1943), p. 178.
- 14. Ibid.
- 15. Gianni Vattimo, 'Project and Legitimization I,' Lotus International 48/49 (1986), p. 121-122.
- 16. Ibid., p. 124.
- 17. Ibid., p. 125.
- 18. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 68.
- 19. Roland H. Bainton, *Early Christianity* (New york, Toronto and London: Van Nostrand, 1960), pp. 12-13.
- 20. Ortega Y Gasset, 'The Self and the other' [1952], in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 194, 195, 196.
- 21. Marsilio Ficino, Commentary on Plato's Symposium (de Amore), 1475, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, eds. A. Hofstadter and R. Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 204-238.
- 22. Marsilio Ficino, de Amore, in Philosophies of Art and Beauty, p. 222.
- 23. Joseph Rykwert, *The First Moderns: Architects of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1983] 1991), p. 13.
- 24. Ficino, de Amore, in Philosophies of Art and Beauty, pp. 207-208.
- 25. Adrian Stokes, Michelangelo [1958], in The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, Vol. III (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 33.
- 26. Adrian Stokes, *Art and Science* [1949], in *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, Vol. II* (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 194.
- 27. Gasset, 'The Self and the other', p. 197.
- 28. Gasset, 'The Dehumanization of Art' [1925], in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 18.
- 29. Voltaire, *Memory's Adventure* [1775], in *Candide, Zadig, and Selected Stories*, Trans. Donald A. Frame (New york and Toronto: Signet Classic: New American Library, 1961), pp.325-326.
- 30. Ibid., p. 328.