

Peg Zeglin Brand (editor)

*Beauty Unlimited*

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In the Foreword to *Beauty Unlimited*, Carolyn Korsmeyer asks the following questions: Is all good art *pro tanto* beautiful? Does one need to ignore the beauty of the human body (and escape the world of physical desire) to experience aesthetic pleasure? To what extent are standards of human beauty pan-cultural? Or, are our conceptions of beauty so conditioned by societal norms that nothing remains if we take away the complex web of social hierarchies, gender structures, cults of youth, and the like?

One approach to answering these questions is to assert that there are beauties plural, and that no conception of (human) beauty exists independent of political meanings. Another is to transform the concept of beauty to include noncanonical exemplars, thus reevaluating the often overlooked beauty in people who are marginalized by current concepts of beauty. Such is the task of *Beauty Unlimited*. Some articles in the collection try to reshape conceptions of beauty; some explore, evaluate, and criticize current standards and norms; and others detail and discuss recent work of feminist artists. The title of the anthology reflects its worthy call to arms: let's move past traditional theories of beauty, move from a local to a global view, and engage in more (and different) dialogs on feminist perspectives on beauty.

The scope of *Beauty Unlimited* is ambitious. It draws from fields such as art criticism, art history, film, dance, feminist theory, aesthetics, and cultural studies. The focus is on visual aesthetics of human beauty including, for example,

interesting discussions of plastic surgery and tanning; Western and non-Western art, sculpture, and dance; film; magazine advertisements; and television. This is some of the terrain covered in Brand's past edited volume, *Beauty Matters* (2000), with a few overlapping contributors, including Noël Carroll, Paul C. Taylor, and Eva Kit Wah Man.

*Beauty Unlimited* is divided into four parts. Part 1, "Revising the Concept of Beauty," provides a foundation for Brand's project. It includes a number of essays that examine the ways in which philosophical accounts of beauty have been influenced by issues of class, race, gender, ability, and sexuality. It also contains a short piece about the curatorial problems of 2007's "Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art" exhibit, by art critic Eleanor Heartney. Part 2, "Standards of Beauty," pursues the theme of female embodiment, specifically the ways in which standards of female beauty contribute to the objectification of women's bodies. Essays in this section discuss issues as wide-ranging as the painting of Jenny Saville, paper dolls depicting Frida Kahlo, plastic surgery, tanning, and the rising popularity of female *culos*. A lovely photo essay entitled "Indigenous Beauty" (by Phoebe M. Farris) is also included in this section. Part 3, "The Body in Performance," focuses on representations of female beauty in performance. Specifically, essays discuss Balinese *Legong* dance, Bollywood movies, and feminist performance artists including (another) essay about ORLAN by Brand. Part 4, "Beauty and the State," focuses its attention on the politics of female bodies in different regions of the world, including the Middle East, North Africa, China, and the United States. It includes a particularly arresting essay by Cynthia Freeland about the quirky and ornate artwork and powerful photographs of Soody Sharifi. The book also contains a beautiful color insert showcasing an assortment of artworks discussed.

Due to space constraints, I will be able to discuss only a few of the most interesting essays from the collection here. In "Arthur Danto and the Problem of Beauty," the first essay of Part 1, Noël Carroll asserts that the problem of beauty is that beauty does not seem to play an adequate role in contemporary theories of art. Carroll rehearses general arguments from Danto's monograph *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Danto 2003), including Danto's definition of art, which states that X is an artwork if and only if (a) X is about something and (b) X's content is embodied in an appropriate form (30).

Danto's first condition prompts the question, "What about works that are merely beautiful?" Not artworks under Danto's definition, Carroll calls them artworks *simpliciter*, that is, artworks that are beautiful but have no meaningful content.

Danto says: "Beauty---where it is pertinent to works of art *qua* art---has a rhetorical function within the work to perform, namely to embody whatever the work is about, or to express its meaning" (36). According to Danto, beauty serving this goal is "inner beauty." Carroll suggests that this implies there can be external beauty---beauty not connected to the artwork *qua* art---and suspects that Danto is simply not concerned with external beauty. However, most of us are; in fact, most of this anthology is.

Carroll suggests that Danto's "inner beauty" is but one kind of beauty. Though Carroll resists the temptation to catalogue other types of beauty in this essay, he does present one. Danto's theory references Hegel, and Carroll notes that Hegel's aesthetics reference Aloys Hirt. Hirt thought of beauty as something that "is adequate to its aim." Adaptation or appropriateness, then, is beauty in a broader sense. This notion of "fitness" as beauty has recently been discussed in Allen Carlson and Glenn Parsons's *Functional Beauty* (Carlson and Parsons 2008) and continues to be a topic of debate in contemporary aesthetics.

Carroll's essay helpfully introduces the reader to contemporary analytic aesthetics and its definitional arguments. By placing this essay first, Brand dispenses with institutional theories of art so the reader can delve deeper into the quagmire of beauty's use and abuse in various cultures. As such, Carroll arms the reader with a theory of art that accommodates the diverse views of beauty that follow. How does the essay serve the pluralistic and feminist goals of the anthology? Carroll shows us another way to interpret beauty's meaning, one that is perhaps less likely to overlook "superficial" beauty.

Monique Roelofs's "Beauty's Relational Labor," also in part 1, contributes an exposé of historical aestheticians' less savory connections among race, gender, and beauty. She discusses beauty in connection to moral norms, economic norms, and racial norms. She first examines Shaftesbury's claim that aesthetic education is part and parcel of the moral order. Unfortunately, she argues, Shaftesbury's aesthetic education institutionalizes unjust gender and racial norms. She calls this process "racialized (gendered, class-inflicted) aestheticization" (79). She also criticizes Hume's process describing how one develops a capacity to judge the aesthetic and the moral, believing that this "knowledge" is couched in terms of middle-class, white, male experience. For Hume, having taste helps fosters connections with "desirable others" (82). Roelofs correctly points out, however, that such connections are selective bonds that exclude blacks, peasants, and Indians, while privileging male contributions over those of females. She concludes that beauty is crucial to the economic, political, and social well-being of the state, yet this well-

being is warped by the exclusion of many.

As more evidence for the racialization of beauty, Roelofs discusses Burke's account of beauty, which she argues defines beauty in terms of unjust norms of gender, race, and class. Her interesting discussion of the implications of Burke's theory for black femininity is quite powerful. Burke labels the color black "terrible" and states that when one looks upon a black woman one is "struck with great horror at the sight" (85). It is not groundbreaking to suggest that the historical aestheticians Roelofs discusses are racially biased and/or sexist. More should be said about what to do with this philosophical legacy.

Roelofs concludes the essay by stating that part of the beauty of beauty lies in its dynamic nature. Shifting allegiances and changing ethical valences mean that beauty's relations are ever-evolving. She surprisingly claims that beauty will never be "set aright," so aestheticians and feminists should merely wade through beauty's ambivalent history. Her feminist critique of traditional conceptions of beauty is lacking to the extent that it fails to seize the opportunity to shift the discussion of beauty, as some of the other essays in this collection try to do (see particularly Diana Tietjens Meyers's "Jenny Saville Remakes the Female Nude: Feminist Reflections on the State of Art" in part 2). Even so, her essay provides interesting historical analysis and, as such, is an important contribution to the book.

Part 2, "Standards of Beauty," is perhaps the anthology's strongest section, with essays by Diana Tietjens Meyers, Mary Devereaux, and Paul C. Taylor with Karina L. Céspedes-Cortes. Along with Brand, Devereaux co-edited in 2003 a special issue of *Hypatia* on "Feminism and Aesthetics" (Carolyn Korsmeyer and Hilde S. Hein had co-edited the first special issue on the topic in 1993).

In her essay, "Is Medical Aesthetics Really Medical?" Devereaux asks whether "medical aesthetics" (cosmetic surgery) is permissible under the Hippocratic requirement that physicians "do no harm." Devereaux reports that cosmetic surgery has its roots in sixteenth-century syphilitic bodies and the treatment of facial wounds of injured World War I soldiers. During its nascent stages, plastic surgery was thus designed to create "a façade of health" (176). She notes that cosmetic surgery is an umbrella term that covers reconstructive surgery (aimed at restoring basic function) as well as elective procedures (such as Botox). Her present critique addresses only the latter.

Devereaux challenges four arguments in favor of elective procedures, the last of which justifies plastic surgery as a kind of qualitative improvement. Before the

twentieth century, medicine was not concerned with preventive care; in the twenty-first century, medicine has gone beyond preventive care to optimization. She challenges philosopher Julian Savulescu's argument that optimization may be ethically required. For example, Savulescu argues, if you have a child whose ears stick out, not to "correct" the abnormality would be cruel. Devereaux presents two lines of objections to the optimization argument. First, and perhaps most important, optimization rests on the fallacy that appearance modifications improve human functionality, which she claims they do not. Smaller noses, for example, do not improve breathing function. Second, she imagines disastrous effects for biomedical research if such optimization were to become the norm for rich societies and patients. To employ scarce medical resources for optimization borders on unethical. She concludes by stating that asking your doctor to help you in your improvement process is not inherently unethical, but including beauty under the purview of the professional ideals of medical practice raises serious ethical concerns. And although I find her argument against Savulescu interesting and useful, the majority of her article focuses on three other arguments for plastic surgery. The first two of the arguments she engages with (that is, cosmetic surgery is just another branch of medicine and as such needs no special justification, and that plastic surgery just answers consumers' demand) are so ethically flat-footed that I wish less time had been spent deflating them and more time had been spent delving into the final two arguments.

The last essay I would like to discuss is Eva Kit Wah Man's "Beauty at the State: Female Bodies as State Apparatus and Recent Beauty Discourse in China." Man asks whether in China "female ideals are nationally constructed for the social and political benefit of the state" (381). She adeptly provides evidence for this claim by describing aesthetic trends in female beauty over the last century.

Starting with the "enlightening period" (1919-1949) she depicts the influence Western democracy, culture, and science had on Chinese beauty norms. Women wore tight clothing, had short haircuts, and shortened their *qibao*---the traditional dress commonly worn at the time. However, after the Mukden Incident in 1931, the state encouraged women to be civic minded, which entailed developing strong physiques and participating in *tiyu* (sports). A cult of health called *jianmei* followed. Backed by a populist and feminist agenda, women were encouraged to wear bathing suits and transform their bodies to have "healthy curves" including "high nipples" (371-72).

After 1949, when the New China was founded, Man notes the rise of "Iron Women"---women who wore the same Maoist uniforms as their male compatriots.

Man notes that historians refer to this period as the "degradation period" because gender norms were degraded into genderless ones (374).

The "awakening period" starts in the late 1970s after the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976. Women became re-sexualized in public perception, and re-Westernized. China engaged with cosmopolitan standards of fashion, and the major fashion magazines (for example, *Vogue* and *Marie Claire*) launched their own Chinese versions. Man points to the 2008 Beijing Olympics as a pivotal moment in Chinese body aesthetics. Young female university students who desired to be Olympic volunteers were given prescriptions detailing the number of teeth allowed to show when they smiled. Man includes a powerful photo of this training where women are being taught how to walk with books on their heads. This globalization, she concludes, has had the effect of "flattening" female bodies. Earlier popular images of women, she explains, showed an aesthetic depth and genuineness that cosmopolitan norms do not. She ends by stating, "There are no subjects here; one has no more knowledge of the particular females being represented, when they are all shown in the monotonous language of globalized cosmetic products and fashion" (381).

Man provides compelling evidence for her thesis. She concludes on a sour note, implying that too much has been sacrificed for cosmopolitanism. Yet there is little discussion about how past beauty norms were oppressive. Although women gained some parity under the Maoist regime, Man does not bemoan the loss of personal expression. Rather, she describes the "iron girl" aesthetic as anti-feminine. If the workers' uniforms were not unisex, would the beauty norm be less oppressive?

Having discussed a few essays in the volume, I will now turn to some thoughts about its overall structure. *Beauty Unlimited* is presented in four parts, but I find the organization somewhat confusing and mostly unhelpful. Reading the book front to back, the collection may come across as a hodgepodge of disparate essays. Some essays seem entirely out of place. For example, Keith Lehrer's "Feminist Art, Content, and Beauty" in part 2 has little in common with the section's theme "The Body in Performance." Lehrer discusses the concept of feminist art and argues that such art challenges us to exercise our autonomy, and thus is beautiful and useful (303). Although he discusses performance artists such as ORLAN, the vast majority of his discussion focuses on two-dimensional art. As such this essay might be better served appearing at the front of the book in the section discussing feminist art within the canon of philosophical aesthetics. As another example, Gregory Velazco y Trianosky's essay on aesthetically laden constructions of race makes more sense placed with the other essays that discuss standards of beauty,

not with essays (such as Danto's) that Brand claims are "laying the groundwork" for revising the concept of beauty (part 1: "Revising the Concept of Beauty: Laying the Groundwork").

Another concern involves the effectiveness of essays in accomplishing goals of their respective sections. Specifically, it is not clear that the essays in part 1 successfully lay the groundwork for "revising the concept of beauty." Carroll's essay discusses how Danto (and by extension philosophical aesthetics) has had an overly narrow definition of beauty. By contrast, Whitney Davis's essay on queer beauty lays no such groundwork. Davis's "Queer Beauty" is so thoroughly historical that there is little to no extension of his Kantian project to current beauty standards. Also, Heartney's (short) piece on the "Global Feminisms" exhibit thoughtfully confronts the difficulties of curating a feminist art show, but does little to further the goal of revising the concept of beauty.

My final criticism pertains to the interdisciplinary nature of the volume. Although the inclusion of a range of interdisciplinary essays has the advantage of including interesting work of non-philosophers and exposing philosophers to this work, philosophers might find some of the essays lacking in critical analysis. For example, Phoebe M. Farris presents a beautiful photo essay on indigenous beauty, but a scholarly companion essay discussing Farris's work would have crystallized the issue more effectively. Another illustration can be found in Fedwa Malti-Douglas's "Beauty between Disability and Gender: Frida Kahlo in Paper Dolls," which focuses on a particular case study to discuss the disappearance of visible disability in popular culture. In the children's art book Malti-Douglas discusses, Frida Kahlo's paper dolls have no visible disability. Although this is an interesting case study, a more global discussion about beauty and disability seemed necessary to round out the discussion.

Beauty has an ugly problem. Traditional theories of beauty have undoubtedly contributed to female subjugation. However, Brand warns us not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Traditional theories have a place alongside feminist theories and political inquiry. The bridges between these two, however, are less clear. *Beauty Unlimited* advances the discussion by describing the problem, thereby setting the stage for future feminist scholarship.

## REFERENCES

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