

The world he has lost

Dave Hickey's beauty treatment

Grant Kester

While the American art world of the 1980s is often associated with the curious coexistence of 'death of the author' postmodernism and hairy-chested Neo-expressionism, there was another event, much less noted at the time, that was to have a considerable impact on the future of contemporary art. It was the gradual movement of women and various minority groups into the art world through teaching positions, and through the nonprofit artists' space sector that emerged during the 1970s.¹ Their numbers were never overwhelming and acceptance was almost always grudging, but by the early '90s the absolute dominance of white men as artists and in key gatekeeper positions in the arts (curators, teachers, critics, etc.), was broken. Like most demographic shifts this one precipitated a backlash. However, in the culturally enlightened precincts of the art world it wasn't acceptable to openly attack people on the basis of their sexuality or skin colour. Instead, the backlash expressed itself indirectly, often through attacks on the theoretical discourses that emerged at around the same time, which critiqued the art historical canon from the perspective of class, race, sexuality or gender (feminism, queer theory, postcolonial theory, and so on). Long simmering resentments would occasionally burst forth in less guarded form. Thus, in 1989, photographic historian Bill Jay issued a manifesto of sorts attacking the Women's Caucus of the Society for Photographic Education as a 'nasty little pimple on the face of photographic education', run by 'frothing at the mouth feminist leftists' who were using 'scurrilous feminist propaganda' to 'distort' and 'subvert' the field. One doesn't have to be a student of Freud to recognize that Jay's hostility was motivated by something slightly more threatening than the decision to assign Jacqueline Rose readings in art history seminars.²

I was editing *Afterimage* through the better part of the '90s, a journal that was known for covering aspects of independent media art practice (such as activist work around AIDS or labour issues, Third Cinema, and community-based photography) that were generally ignored by the mainstream art press. We conducted a reader's survey in 1992, and while most of the responses were supportive we also received a number that were highly critical ('Less on and on descriptions of politically-correct film and video. Enough already with the third world video; you've seen one, you've seen them all', etc.).³ What I found particularly interesting at the time was the consistent yoking together of attacks on art produced by black, Asian and Latin American artists, or gays and lesbians, and attacks on particular theoretical paradigms (queer theory, feminism, Marxism, etc.), as if these were somehow identical. I suppose, in a way, that they were, although not in the conspiratorial sense that some of our readers imagined. Theory during the 1980s and early '90s facilitated an epistemological break with earlier paradigms in art practice. It was a way for younger artists and critics to clear some space between themselves and the norms that governed art-making at the time. Further, it tended to 'problematise' (to use the language of the day) concepts like self-expression, the universality of art, and creative genius that a lot of artists preferred to embody rather than question; to make artists self-conscious about their privilege. The distance from conventional models of artistic identity opened up by theoretical research was invigo-



rating for some and debilitating for others. I think the effect on straight, white artists of seeing gays and lesbians, black people, and other 'others' beginning to exhibit in 'their' galleries and teach in 'their' departments could be similarly disorienting.

Old Martinis in New Shakers

In the absence of a new paradigm the attack on what might be loosely termed 'postmodern' art and theory could only go so far. There was an obvious intellectual market for a theory that could preserve the cherished truths of conventional art practice (the magical power of the artwork to transcend its commodity status, the artist as a heroic visionary, the primacy of taste, and the aristocratic pleasures of the collector and the connoisseur) while insulating the artist from charges of elitism or co-option by the art market. That new paradigm began to take shape around the concept of beauty during the early 1990s. This wasn't your mother's beauty; but rather, a retooled, slightly risky beauty that was simultaneously sexy and politically dangerous. It found its Jeremiah in the person of Dave Hickey, author of the wildly successful books *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (1994) and *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (1997). Hickey has made something of a career posing as the perennial outsider whose home truths are just a little too real for the culturati to tolerate. Literally 'too cool for school', despite the fact that he's a tenured professor at the University of Nevada, Hickey has now attained the status of a cultural demigod; celebrated by such bellwethers of middlebrow taste as the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and awarded a half million dollar 'genius' fellowship by the MacArthur Foundation.

The Invisible Dragon was probably the most widely read book among American art school students of the last decade. This is curious, because a good bit of Hickey's spleen is vented towards university studio programs. But of course that's precisely the appeal. Hickey provides a way for students to sneer at the (parental) institutions through which they pass, sampling the pleasures of institutional compromise while deferring just a bit longer the inevitable Oedipal resolution.

However, I think there was a deeper appeal in Hickey's work, embedded in the somewhat labyrinthine account of aesthetic experience that he presents in between stories designed to advertise his *demimondaine* realness. Hickey presents a narrative of loss in which the 'old' art world of his youth, populated by iconoclastic dealers and boho artists and writers directly out of central casting, has been replaced by an impersonal, bureaucratized and moralistic maze of *kunsthalle*, ICAs, public funding agencies, and graduate programs, dedicated to eviscerating all that was joyful and spontaneous in art and turning it into a pious improvement scheme replete with wall texts and pedantic catalogue essays. In the good old days the art world was ruled by iconoclastic but savvy dealers like Leo Castelli and Paula Cooper, who were less concerned with making a buck than with the sheer love of art. Even an unknown 'cowboy' like Hickey could wander into their 'little stores' and 'find things out'. Art dealers are, in Hickey's account, no different from the guy who runs the Billabong Surf Shop; bubbling over with excitement, and eager to share it with any passerby, collector or not.⁴ The art market isn't some gilded prison run for the benefit of arriviste yuppies and blue blood culture vultures, it's just a bunch of passionate enthusiasts united by their love of art; more like a Star Trek convention than a business.

And then the darkness came and the little stores were made to feel ashamed. Art became institutionalized and professionalized with the expansion of college-level studio education and public art funding. Rich collectors don't really 'own' art, they are more like caretakers or hobbyists, but academics are another matter. 'All the treasures of culture were divvied up,' as Hickey writes, 'and owned by professors, as certainly as millionaires own the beach-fronts of Maine.' During the 1970s and '80s a bunch of puritanical do-gooders started raising questions about commodification, trying to police the otherwise uninhibited desires set free by the pleasure machine of the market. Hickey legitimates this rather sanguine embrace of privatized art by relentlessly staging his own munificent openness; shocking the stodgy professors by embracing Norman Rockwell and Roseanne in the same breath as Pontormo and Mapplethorpe.⁵ How could Leo Castelli's artists be elitist when the pleasures that their works evoke are no different than those to be found on the Vegas strip or the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*?

Art schools are only part of the problem, according to Hickey. The *primum mobile* of this vast left-wing conspiracy is, of all things, the National Endowment for the Arts. This is a rather remarkable claim, given that the NEA's budget at its height was well under \$200 million (the equivalent of five Van Gogh canvases at 1987 prices), only a small portion of which ever went to fund contemporary visual art. Nevertheless, Hickey endows the NEA with a remarkably efficient malevolence, arguing that it effectively 'transformed the institutional art world into a government-regulated industry'.⁶ Hickey's particular genius was to link the concept of beauty with a kind of potted libertarianism that naturalised the relationship between 'desire' and the market, at precisely the moment that a recrudescing capitalism (fuelled by the stock market boom of the '90s) was coming to dominate American political dis-

course. Here is Hickey, doing a creditable impersonation of conservative icon Milton Friedman: 'all our basic ideas about horizontal relationships between people derive from the premises of contract law. The whole purpose of a commercial contract is to establish the equality of the two people who enter into the contract... in my view... the basic pragmatic justification for the existence of legal rights is the conditions of commerce.' 'Commerce is a simple thing,' Hickey continues, 'When I was an art dealer: I have [sic] paintings, you have money, you want paintings, I want money... It is a lateral relationship, an exchange between equals, an exchange of desire.'⁷ One may be forgiven for failing to recognize the image of the market presented here, as a neutral mechanism for organising 'lateral' exchange among 'equal' subjects, in an era of NAFTA, GATT, and the rampant monopolisation and centralisation of both capital and political power in multinational conglomerates. In Hickey's world desire is simply one more commodity to be bought and sold—it provides the psychic energy needed to fuel the consumption of commodities on which the market itself depends.

Voodoo Aesthetics

In Hickey's Gingrichian narrative the state is cast as the puritanical killjoy that dictates to the individual on behalf of a grudgingly tolerated concept of the public good, while the market is the domain of personal freedom. Hickey thus projects a classic libertarian opposition between the repressive state (standing for morality and the regulation of desire) and the 'free' (libidinal) world of market exchange (filled with self-actualising individuals following their desire), onto the art world. Hickey postulates a kind of Nietzschean dynamic in which it is the interaction between these two essentially autonomous forces, the Apollonian state and the Dionysian free market, that provides the impetus for contemporary art and culture. But in the US untangling the interests of the state from those of the private sector (given the current system of subsidies, tax breaks, tariffs, defence contracting, and outright corporate welfare) would be difficult if not impossible. Nowhere in his account of the emancipatory powers of the market is there any acknowledgment of the long tradition of critical thought directed precisely at questioning the ostensible neutrality of the 'horizontal' relationship established in contract law (civil rights case work being only one example), within a larger legal system that is heavily biased towards the interests of property.

Hickey's analysis of contemporary art thus hinges on a mythic image of the market system which transforms the greed that drives capitalist accumulation into desire; a natural and even emancipatory component of human subjectivity. This hypostatisation of an undifferentiated desire leaves us no way to understand the social and political implications of ostensibly personal choices or tastes. The sprawling cottage industry of Deleuzian studies notwithstanding, this sort of uncritical, ahistorical cult of the consumer has clearly reached its sell-by date, especially in a country that has so strenuously defended the sacrosanct 'freedom' of its citizens to gorge themselves endlessly on the world's resources. It should come as no surprise that Hickey describes his work, apparently without irony, as an example of 'supply side' aesthetics ('I'm a consumer. I'm arguing for the consumer's side of the transaction.').⁸ The difficulty comes when Hickey wants to argue that art can be something more than a Matisse-like 'mental soother' for the tired bourgeois software magnate. This requires a rather confusing narrative about viewers being seduced by the visual beauty of a work of art, only to find themselves (inadvertently), identifying with a radically different subjectivity (Mapplethorpe's 'X' portfolio work is the example typically used here), which they will then come to appreciate (or at least tolerate). Here our (inherently progressive) 'desire' is used to police our (inherently defensive and prejudicial) conscious reason. Thus, Hickey's claim to speak on behalf of the hapless viewer, overwhelmed by the patronising and judgmental hectoring of 'activist' art, is somewhat disingenu-

ous. It is not desire for its own sake that he advocates, but desire as a tool to correct or liberalise our perception of difference. Whether the viewer is seduced or assaulted the underlying function of the work remains essentially pedagogical and orthopaedic.

Hickey, and fellow travelers such as Wendy Steiner and Peter Schjeldahl, cast themselves as the embattled guardians of 'experience' over 'discourse about experience', the irrefutable evidence of the senses over the abstractions of theory. The assertion of beauty and pleasure as the only legitimate basis of an art experience and the reaction against theory (which is seen as contaminating the purity of that experience) coalesce around the troubled figure of the individual. The artist (as an exemplary individual) becomes the final bunkered outpost of resistant subjectivity against a whole array of abstract cognitive forces. The somatic or sensual experience that they register through their works is understood as having an inherently progressive political power, constituting a pre-social domain of personal autonomy and virtual play. This is part of an essentially conservative yearning for the plenitude of the real; the unmediated access to the world that we can achieve only by listening to the truth of the body. Schjeldahl claims to recognize beauty on an almost 'biological' level: 'Beauty makes me aware of my brain as a physical organ... My shoulders come down.' Steiner is confident that 'we will not be led into fascism, or rape, or child abuse through aesthetic experience'.⁹ The individual body is thus immune to the effects of history, power, and the totalising drive of reason—through the body we intuit the intrinsic rightness of things; a 'rightness' that is, by implication, both aesthetic and ethical. In her book *The Scandal of Pleasure* Steiner divides the world, roughly, into art critics and artists who 'love' art on the one hand, and 'the world' or 'the public', on the other. All criticism of art that does not accept its *a priori* value is dismissed as a product of a philistine know-nothingism driven by a fundamentalist fear of the subversive (and inherently progressive) power of the visual image.¹⁰ Of course this simplistic partitioning off of the body and the mind, the visual and the textual, on the basis of a Manichean division between domination on the one hand, and freedom on the other, is not without its political liabilities. Steiner's reference to fascism is particularly striking in this regard, considering the Nazis' adroit handling of the somatic and the sensual; the appeal to 'blood' and the galvanizing effects of light, color, and music in political rallies.

In Hickey's account the market, far from generating inequalities and encouraging the creation of works that appeal primarily to wealthy collectors, is actually the most perfect mechanism for distributing rewards and determining merit in the arts: the more effectively you deliver 'pleasure' to the viewer the more successful your career. University art schools and public art funding distort this 'natural' mechanism by allowing young artists to develop their work independent of market forces. It constitutes a kind of welfare or affirmative action for those artists who can't otherwise compete in the pleasure derby of the gallery scene. As I noted at the beginning of this essay, one of the chief effects of the expansion of the nonprofit artists' space movement, and of the growth of MFA programs, was to bring some greater diversity to an art world that for decades had been ruled by a relatively small coterie of New York dealers, curators and collectors, and their 'stables' of (nearly all white, and mostly male) artists. And it was precisely a desire to separate themselves from the Antiques Roadshow mentality of the art market that led artists to establish non-profit exhibition spaces in the first place. Hickey provides the comforting assurance that all those annoying artists during the 1980s and '90s who raised questions about racial privilege and sexual representation, or who challenged the cosy commodification of the gallery system, were really nothing more than mean spirited whiners who failed to 'test the magic of the market place' (to use one of Ronald Reagan's favorite expressions). All that 'bullshit about social power', as painter and critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

has so eloquently written, was simply a distraction from the deeper truth of artistic beauty.¹¹ By now, 'beauty' has joined 'the body' as one of the leading intellectual conceits of the new millennium. One can hardly swing a dead French theorist without encountering another conference, anthology or exhibit devoted to one or the other of these themes. Hickey and his cohort are the well established heroes of a generation of young artists eager to enjoy a Tribeca loft or a Malibu beach house free of the nagging whispers of an unhappy conscience. As we contemplate a return to the art world Hickey has lost, we would do well to recall that the beauty he evokes, not unlike the patriotism that surrounds us today, is something to be felt rather than questioned. This is an equation we may yet come to regret.

Notes

1. See Howardena Pindell's essay 'Art World Racism', in *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell*, intro. by Lowery Stokes Sims. (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997).
2. Bill Jay, 'Fascism of the Left', Shots #22 (January/February 1989), reprinted in *Photo Metro*, (April 1989), p.25. Also see Catherine Lord, 'History, Their Story and (Male) Hysteria', *Afterimage* (summer 1990), p.9-10.
3. '1992 Afterimage Readers Survey', *Afterimage* (September 1992), p.3.
4. Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997), p.13.
5. *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*, pp.13, 71.
6. 'Richard Nixon's expansion of the NEA in the nineteen seventies has, over the years, effectively transformed the institutional art world into a government-regulated industry dedicated to maintaining a strict consensus of virtue.' *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*, p.152. Hickey's predilection for monetarist fiscal policies is particularly evident in his criticism of Nixon for curtailing tax breaks for art collectors in 1972. See Dave Hickey, 'An Address Regarding the Consequences of Supply-Side Aesthetics', *Art Issues* (Summer 1998), p.13.
7. Dave Hickey and Peter Schjeldahl, 'The Nature of Beauty', Proceedings: American Photography Institute, National Graduate Seminar, Photography Department, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University (June 4-17, 1995), p.40. Here is Friedman, the doyen of Reaganomics: 'Indeed a major source of objection to a free economy is [that] it gives people what they want instead of what a particular groups thinks they ought to want. Underlying most arguments against the free market is a lack of belief in freedom itself.' Milton Friedman, with the assistance of Rose Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p.15.
8. Timothy Cahill, 'So You Think Today's Art Isn't Pretty? Look Again', *The Christian Science Monitor* (August 21, 1998), p.B-4.
9. Dave Hickey and Peter Schjeldahl, 'The Nature of Beauty', p.39 and Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.211.
10. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe provides a more theoretically ambitious, albeit somewhat turgid, version of this argument in *Beyond Piety: Critical Essays on the Visual Arts, 1986-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
11. Bill Beckley citing Gilbert-Rolfe in the introduction to Gilbert-Rolfe's *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), p.xviii. Hickey's devotion to the art market is so absolute that he actually ascribes the 'dematerialization' of art during the 1960s and '70s (in conceptualism, performance and activist art practices) to the failure of artists to find gallery spaces. 'Non-object, non-portable art arose... as a strategic reaction to a commercial reality: all the walls were full!' *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*, p.64-65