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Beauty – A Power Point presentation

Heller, Lynne

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Beauty – A Power Point Presentation

I once Googled the word 'beauty' and through some odd glitch of the virtual world got the following message:

The screenshot shows the Google search interface. At the top, the Google logo is followed by links for 'Advanced Search', 'Preferences', 'Language Tools', and 'Search Tips'. Below the logo is a search bar containing the word 'beauty' and a 'Google Search' button. A navigation bar below the search bar includes links for 'Web', 'Images', 'Groups', 'Directory', and 'News'. Below the navigation bar, a news snippet is visible: 'News: Miss World puts pain before beauty - The Scotsman - 12 hours ago. Try Google News: Search news for beauty or browse the latest headlines'. The main content area displays the message: 'No standard web pages containing all your search terms were found. Your search - beauty - did not match any documents. Suggestions: - Make sure all words are spelled correctly. - Try different keywords. - Try more general keywords.' To the right of this message is a 'Sponsored Links' box for 'Semi Permanent Cosmetics' with the text: 'Makeup and skin care thats good for your skin. Waterproof, kissproof www.alldaybeauty.com Interest: [progress bar] See your message here...'. At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with the text: 'Also, you can try Google Answers for expert help with your search. Google Home - Advertise with Us - Business Solutions - Services & Tools - Jobs, Press, & Help ©2003 Google'.

My search – **beauty** – did not match any documents. There was no beauty on the internet except for a news item – 'Miss World puts pain before beauty' and a sponsored link for 'Semi Permanent Cosmetics'. Most days it is easy to believe there is no beauty to be found on the internet but not even one reference? –what in the world doesn't contain any beauty whatsoever? I've haven't been able to replicate this same strange result from our collective brain, the Google search engine, since. When I last tried my luck I got back 'about 77,300,000' references for beauty in 0.05 seconds. But I guess the question that is really begging is why look for beauty at all? As my friend Judith Dingle once confessed 'I guess I'm just a beauty addict.' And as soon as the words were out of her mouth I realized that in a nutshell was my same diagnosis. And now I spend a lot of time pondering the unanswerable.

Like a lot of enigmatic intellectual quests this one got really cranked up in grad school. Beauty—what is it? why is it? is there enough of it already? do I have to make more of it? and does anybody really want to talk about it anymore? The last question seems the easiest to tackle so I'll start there. Like all of the circular discussions in this world, it simply won't stop tormenting us. Wherever there is talk about visual culture, design or art, beauty is lurking in the shadows just waiting for the perfect moment to rear up and make everyone groan. In an effort to squelch it for good, some even claim it to be a non-issue. But then you walk down the street on a perfect spring day with the sun shining, trees budding, flowers blooming and you just know it is a beautiful day and that feels great. – gotcha.

But maybe there is a difference between experiencing beauty in the everyday and the role it plays in ART. Hmm... that would assume the much maligned, modernist conceit that life is life and art is –well something entirely apart from life. Can beauty be a daily, virtually instinctual response to visual stimulation and yet play no part in the most visual of all mediums – fine art?

So if we can't solve the puzzle beauty can we just stop talking about it? Not talking seems willfully passive aggressive. But how much is it getting discussed and how intensely. A decade or so ago Dave Hickey, perhaps tongue planted in cheek, suggested it was to be the pressing issue of the 90's.

I was drifting, daydreaming really, through the waning moments of a panel discussion on the subject of "What's Happening Now," drawing cartoon daggers on a yellow pad and vaguely formulating strategies for avoiding paunch and cookies, when I realized that I was being addressed from the audience. A lanky graduate student had risen to his feet and was soliciting my opinion as to what "the issue of the nineties" would be. Snatched from my reverie, I said, "Beauty," and then, more firmly, "The issue of the nineties will be beauty"—a total improvisatory goof—an off-the-wall, jump-start, free association that

rose unbidden to my lips from God knows where. Or perhaps I was being ironic, wishing it so but not believing it likely? I don't know, but the total, uncomprehending silence that greeted this modest proposal lent it immediate credence for me. My interlocutor plopped back into his seat, exuding dismay, and, out of sheer perversity, I resolved to follow beauty where it led into the silence. Improvising, I began updating Pater; I insisted that beauty is not a thing—"the beautiful" is a thing. In images, I intoned, beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder; and any theory of images that is not grounded in the pleasure in the beholder begs the question of their efficacy and dooms itself to inconsequence. This sounded provocative to me, but the audience continued to sit there, unprovoked, and beauty just hovered there, as well, a word without a language, quiet, amazing, and alien in the sleek, institutional space—like a Pre-Raphaelite dragon aloft on its leather wings.

Enter the Dragon: On The Vernacular of Beauty – Dave Hickey

Beauty didn't become the 'issue of the nineties' as the 'issue of the nineties' seemed to be more about trying to figure out what the issue of the nineties was, but beauty pops up enough that it is still a contender. A couple of contemporary references have caught my eye. In direct response to Hickey's arguments, Morris Yarowsky writes in *The Beauty Fallacy: Dave Hickey's Aesthetic Revisionism* the following:

An unusual event as occurred in the art world. Beauty as a notion or fiction or sentimentally reconstituted category of judgment has experienced a revival in art-critical discourse. It has acquired new legitimacy after a century's dormancy as a term of description and a goal toward which works of art are directed. Beauty is, in Dave Hickey's works, "a seller of soap and sex" that has the power to socialize the aesthetic. For some it has become an absolute value in art.

In a more contemporary reference to beauty, Randy Kennedy writes in the *New York Times* about "up-and-coming New York painter and sculptor...Banks Violette". Kennedy says of one of his pieces "The church, whose construction from salt evokes corrosiveness as well as crystallinity, is intended to be grim but also beautiful in an ethereal way, so that it causes viewers to appreciate its beauty, and by doing so find themselves in some sense implicated in the violence that inspired it."

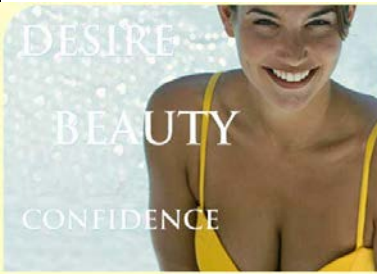
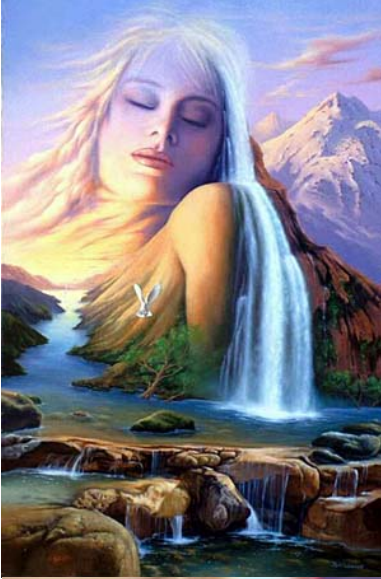
Other reviews in the *New York Times* knock on beauty's door. The critic Holland Cotter writes about Andy Warhol and Rubens, comparing them in an article titled 'Warhol and Rubens: Picture Them as Peas in a Pod'. In a summary sentence he says, "In short, he [Warhol] saw decay where Rubens saw decay, but he also saw beauty." Earlier Cotter had written about Cy Twombly; "Yet seductively exotic as it is, this fruit offers little nourishment...And the question arises again: is beauty alone enough?"

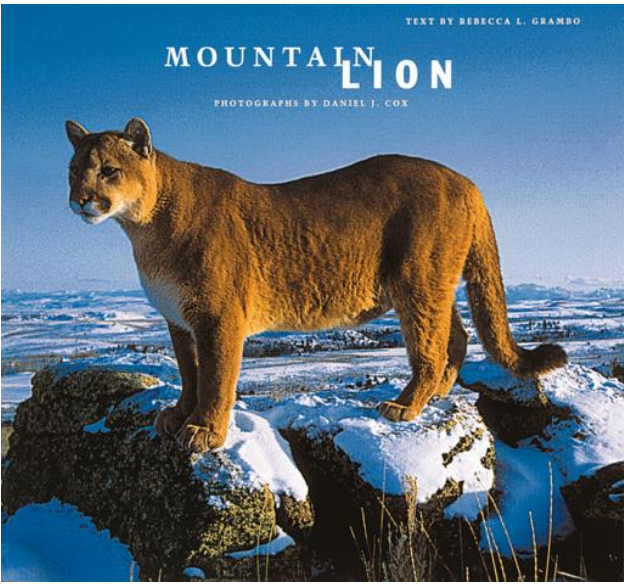
Still in the *New York Times* Phoebe Hoban quotes the artist Eve Sussman as saying; "'I am trying to make video art that is as emotionally involved as a feature film or novel - as psychologically rich and stunningly beautiful - but might only be 15 minutes or half an hour long. I have no shame or embarrassment about trying to make beautiful things."

So people are talking, but intensely, passionately and primarily?—I think not. It is still the exception rather than the rule.

But even if we are only talking about it a little bit then we must have some sense of what it is. Here is the weird thing about beauty – it is a slippery piece of business - everyone knows what it is but nobody can nail it down. It continually defies definition. But many have tried. Here is George Dickie (*The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*), interpreting David Hume in around 1757ish -- "...the normative question of what is correct to call beautiful can be solved by a comprehensive empirical survey of the taste of individuals."

Enter again Google. My thinking was that the biggest pool of the taste of individuals currently is the most widely used search engine. Google has a few criterion for ranking their listings but popularity is one of the most important factors. This time out I got a lot of hits and here there are –the top ten images that someone called beautiful.





Women, nature—and for slight variation an animal.

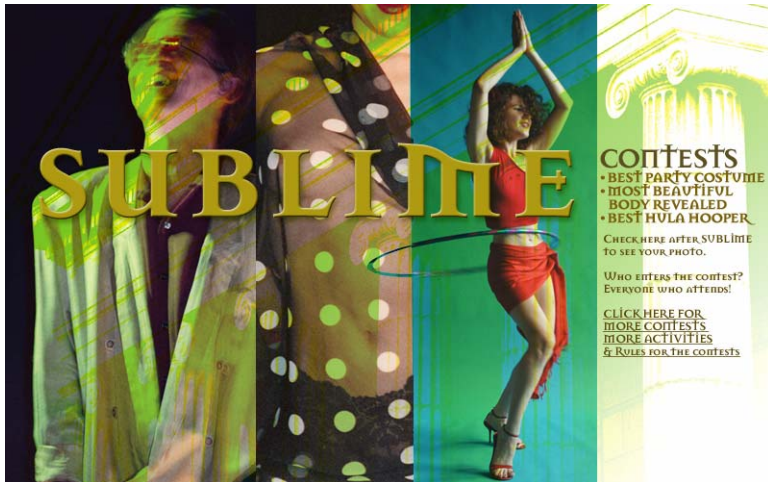
Sometimes more can be gleaned by contrast than inspection. Here are a few of the 'pretty" images in a Google search:



The ugly:



And finally, the sublime.



Honestly, I think the only thing that this exercise pointed out to me was how vacuous the internet can be and how impossible it would be to discern the 'the tastes of individuals' when you are looking at 77,300,000 'references'. So images ironically won't tell us what beauty is maybe words can.

The nature / nurture conundrum is alive and well when it comes to beauty. In the following survey of quotes from thinkers who have tackled the issue, it often comes down to deciding whether our perception of beauty is an inherent, almost instinctual sense of a 'higher' order or conversely that it is simply learnt response and can be molded – an issue of taste really. Plato starts us off by, in a sense, straddling the fence. He proposes that there is a concrete, real world beauty and an ideal that exists quite apart from objects themselves.

Plato therefore draws a sharp line between (1) beautiful things that are included within the class of objects that we see, hear, or touch in "the world of sense" and (2) Beauty itself (and the other Forms), which exists apart from the world of sights and sounds in what Plato calls "the intelligible world."

Plato (428 – 348 B.C.), *The Century of Taste*, Dickie

Aristotle seems to come down heavily on the side of ideal, intrinsic value not bestowed by culture and society but inherent, sitting waiting for an artist to process the inner nature of the object and express that core.

...creates the study of esthetics, the theory of beauty and art. Artistic creation, says Aristotle, springs from the formative impulse and the craving for emotional expression. Essentially the form of art is an imitation of reality; it holds the mirror up to nature... Yet the aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance; for this, and not the external mannerism and detail, is their reality.

Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.) *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant

St. Thomas Aquinas with his Aristotelian bent talks too about the inner and outer life of things, and starts to define the conditions for beauty. He also develops the idea that beauty is pleasing and therefore subjectively understood by others, even though there are objective conditions for its existence.

Aquinas attempts to isolate the properties of the objects that do please and calm desire. He concludes that the conditions of beauty are three: perfection or unimpairedness, proportion or harmony, and brightness or clarity.

Aquinas's theory has both objective and subjective aspects. The stated conditions of beauty are objective features of the world of experience. But the idea of pleasing as part of the meaning of "beauty" introduces into the theory of beauty a subjective element.

St. Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 354 – 430) *The Century of Taste*, Dickie

Jump now to the 17th and 18th centuries, the heyday of beauty theorists. The Earl of Shaftsbury seems on shaky ground but what he does do is establish the idea of efficacy. People have taste and are able to decide and shape thought about what is beautiful rather than it being an inherent quality that we have no say over but to perceive.

His diffuse and unsystematic views are transitional because he holds a Platonic theory of beauty. He also, however propounds and is the main source of the influential theory of the faculty of taste. These two theories are not logically inconsistent. Nevertheless, although a large number of eighteenth-century British philosophers adopted some version of the faculty-of-taste theory, few if any of these empirically inclined thinkers accepted the Platonic doctrine of the Forms.

Earl of Shaftsbury (1671 – 1713), *The Century of Taste*, Dickie

Francis Hutcheson takes this idea one step further by suggesting that beauty has no outward form, we only 'think' beauty.

In Hutcheson's view, not only does the word "beauty" not name a platonic Form, it does not name any object that is seen, heard, or touched. "Beauty," he says, names an "idea rais'd in us"; that is, it denotes an object in the private consciousness of a subject (a person).

Francis Hutcheson (1694 – 1746), *The Century of Taste*, Dickie

In what seems to me to be an important leap forward, Edmund Burke ties our sense of beauty to emotion

"By beauty I mean, that quality, or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it." Unfortunately, he then defines "love" a few lines further on as "that satisfaction which arises to the mind upon contemplating anything beautiful."

Edmund Burke (1728 – 1797), *The Century of Taste*, Dickie

As Dickie points out his argument is circular and could be considered self-defeating but for me it is a kernel of an idea that resonates with my experience. Life, the objective world, concrete objects, other people continually play into my thoughts and my thoughts change the way I see the outside world. The idea that everything is in flux, and that values continually ebb and flow allows for time, taste, emotion and inherent qualities to work their magic and produce beauty.

Spinoza seems to take an even more extreme position. 'Labeling' anything at all will get you into trouble.

And as with good and bad, so with the ugly and the beautiful; these too are subjective and personal terms, which, flung at the universe, will be returned to the sender unhonored.

Beauty, my dear Sir is not so much a quality of the object beheld, as an effect in him who beholds it...The most beautiful hand seen through he microscope will appear horrible...He who says that God has created the world so that it might be beautiful is bound to adopt one of the two alternatives: either that God created the world for the sake of men's pleasure and eyesight, or else that He created men's pleasure and eyesight for the sake of the world.

Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677), *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant

Reducing the theoretical position on beauty of some of the great philosophers into one paragraph is tricky business and Emmanuel Kant has to be one of the hardest of these thinkers to understand—but here goes. On one hand he seems to be able to serve up a recipe for beauty. Durant in *The Story of Philosophy* sums it up in the following:

He begins by correlating design and beauty; the beautiful he thinks, is anything which reveals symmetry and unity of structure, as if it had been designed by intelligence. He observes in passing...that the contemplation of symmetrical design always gives us a disinterested pleasure; and that "an interest in the beauty of nature for its own sake is always a sign of goodness." Many objects in nature show such beauty, such symmetry and unity, as almost to drive us to the notion of supernatural design.

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), *The Story of Philosophy*, Durant

However Dickie in *The Century of Taste* seems to be saying in a seemingly contradictory fashion, that Kant is articulating the adage “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” and, furthermore, only exists in the eye of the beholder—“...judgment of beauty is reflective judgment looking for a non-existent concept...” (*The Century of Taste*, Dickie). This, it seems to me, would make detailing a recipe for beauty futile.

Jumping into the 19th century we have seem to come full circle back to Plato's fence sitting. Charles Baudelaire, in dramatic and expansionist assertions, thinks of beauty not only as crucial to art practice but also both universal and personal at the same time.

... beauty is the fundamental principle of art and distinguishes between an ideal, abstract, permanent beauty and what he calls “accidental, contingent beauty”. Baudelaire...likewise distinguished between “eternal and transitory” or “absolute and particular” beauty and insisted that both elements were inevitably present in all forms of beauty.

...that in all beauty two elements must be present—the relative or circumstantial and the invariable or eternal: “I defy anyone to find a single scrap of beauty which does not contain these two elements”.

Charles Baudelaire (1821 – 1867), *Baudelaire, Man of His Times*, Lois Boe Hyslop

Benedetto Croce, on the other hand, comes down entirely on the side of subjective experience. To the point where he is saying beauty does not exist, only our need to understand a thing perceived. And if we believe we understand that thing then we can see it as beautiful.

What is beauty?...Croce answers that beauty is the mental formation of an image (or a series of images) that catches the essence of the thing perceived. The beauty belongs, again, rather to the inward image than to the outward form in which it is embodied....Both in the artist creating and in the spectator contemplating beauty, the esthetic secret is the expressive image...Beauty is expression.

Benedetto Croce (1866 – 1952) *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant

But it seems the debate will never die down. Here are two razor-sharp minds dukeing it out.

...Wilde once told Whitman, “I cannot listen to anyone unless he attracts me by a charming style, or beauty of them.”... Whitman responded to Wilde, “Why Oscar, it always seems to me that the fellow who makes a dead set of beauty by itself is in a bad way. My idea is that beauty is a result, not an abstraction.”

Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman (19th century)

This survey has focused on the object/person and observer but there is a third element that get thrown into the mix by Arthur Danto—context.

Paradoxically, the concept of beauty may no longer be absolute, as considered by Plato or Kant, but relative. This relativity, however, is contingent on the recognition of a form's conceptual understanding as much as on its aesthetic coherence. Yet its syntactical placement and contextual understanding are highly fragile. For example, a crushed car in a junkyard may not appear beautiful. However, when placed in an isolated context within a white gallery or a museum, as in the recent César retrospective at the Jeu de Paume in Paris (summer 1997), the object is abstracted as material—compressed steel—and, for many observers, appears beautiful.

Arthur Danto (1924 -), *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics, A Sign of Beauty*, Robert C. Morgan

One of the most universally cited examples of pure, ‘uncontested’ beauty is the smile of DaVinci's Mona Lisa. In a heretical (and funny) book about the marketing of the painting, *Becoming Mona Lisa: The Making of a Global Icon*, the

author Donald Sassoon, lays out an argument that her 'beauty' has been almost entirely manufactured. So not only is context critical, but in an embrace of increasingly inclusive theorizing, history and story figure strongly in our ability to see beauty. In fact in the next assessment of beauty, Peter Schjeldahl moves us to an even more comprehensive perception, a melo-dramatic stance much more intense than Baudelaire's wildest dreams.

Beauty is a willing loss of mental control, surrendered to organic process that is momentarily under the direction of an exterior object. The object is not thought and felt about, exactly. It seems to use my capacities to think and feel itself.

Anyone can tolerate only so much beauty. Some years ago, a doctor in Florence announced his discovery of the "Stendhal Syndrome," named after the French writer. Stendhal had reported a kind of nervous breakdown after a spell of looking at masterpieces of Renaissance art. The doctor noted a regular occurrence of the same symptoms of disorientation—ranging, at the extreme, to hallucinations and fainting—in tourists referred to him as patients. For treatment, the doctor prescribed rest indoors with no exposure to art. It occurs to me that contemporary art is hygienic in this regard. I have never had the slightest ouch of the Stendhal Syndrome at a Whitney Biennial.

Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics, Notes on Beauty, Peter Schjeldahl
(1942 -)

So beauty is more than object, more than viewer, more than thought, context and history, it is now a process: a convergence of all these facets of knowing and has moved into a metaphysical realm. But all this discussion has concentrated on how one perceives beauty. Only the most intrepid philosophers actually take a shot at defining parameters for beauty. Vilém Flusser has. He contends that there is a circle of aesthetic criterion that consists of sublimity, beauty, prettiness and ugliness. You slide from one category to another depending of the amount of strangeness/habit that is part of the equation. If you experience something too much then it becomes pretty rather than beautiful. This is basically the context argument but with a twist—the quantity of context not just the specific context at the time.

...a quantifying art criticism will become possible in the future,... Thus it will answer question of the type: "How long will this specific work remain within the zone of beauty before, licked by habit, it slides into prettiness?"...

Habit: The True Aesthetic Criterion, Vilém Flusser (20th century)

Meyer Schapiro weighs in from the opposite corner from Flusser. He theorizes that beauty is perfection and habit allows us to subsume details of perfection to perceive beauty overall and everlasting.

My aim in this paper is to examine the ascription of certain qualities to the work of art as a whole, the qualities of perfection, coherence, and unity of form and content, which are regarded as conditions of beauty.

It is clear from continued experience and close study of works that the judgment of perfection in art, as in nature, is a hypothesis, not a certitude established by an immediate intuition. It implies that a valued quality of the work of art, which has been experienced at one time, will be experienced as such in the future; and insofar as the judgment of perfection covers the character of the parts and their relation to the particular whole, it assumes that the quality found in parts already perceived and cited as example so that perfection will be found in all other parts and aspects to be scrutinized in the future.

Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics, On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content, Meyer Schapiro (20th century)

Thomas McEvilley comes out of a clearly post-modern perspective. His concern is with intention—the beautiful object is only a pointer towards why something was made. And why something is created is of utmost importance.

...in the design sense tribal ritual objects are obviously like our modern art, still they were not made in anything like the mind-set that we call self-expression. The point is that the

production of beautiful objects can be carried out without any of the high-art feelings that we associate with it. This should hint to us vastly different available understandings of our own activity.

On "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief": Part II, Thomas McEvilley

During this 'down through the ages' tour of (unfortunately all male) analysis of beauty I have judicially avoided talking about the sublime, kissing cousin to beauty. Flusser talks in detail about how the beautiful becomes sublime—lack of habit or the terrible, turns beauty into sublimity. We stand in front of nature, the pending storm, in awe and terror and we feel the sublime. But once again a voice proclaims the exact opposite. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860) contends that "Even hostile objects, when we contemplate them without excitation of the will, and without immediate danger, become sublime." Can we and/or must we be disinterested to experience beauty then sublimity? –another thorny question!

The picture of beauty painted by this survey is rich with nuance, variation and insight but did the words capture beauty—they were better than a Google search but only just. They allow me to imagine what beauty is rather than be confronted with culturally neutered and plasticized images that make me laugh rather than inspire. So I would have to say on a very personal level I would rather conjure up the delicious ideal of beauty, get high off of thinking about that pleasure than actually being stuck with anyone else's sense of it. It is very platonic of me but I'm digging the 'Forms'. There is something out there that is real beauty and one day I will get to climb out of Plato's cave and see it. And so says George Santayana (1863 – 1952)—"To feel beauty is a better thing than to understand how we come to feel it."

Ironically, my own little foray into 'the meaning of beauty' was an art piece, not in the visual realm at all but rather a sound piece, 'Yesterdays, 2004'. In this piece I recorded street musicians playing/singing Paul McCartney's legendary song.

A quote by Louise Bourgeois explains better than I can why I would choose sound to explore beauty.

Hearing has the most power. A king of Spain, who was a little insane, could only be brought to reason by listening to the very high voice of a certain male singer—a castrato. Beauty of the ear kept him sane; well, perhaps not really sane, but at least not dangerous.

Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics, Louise Bourgeois

In this piece I recorded street musicians playing/singing Paul McCartney's legendary song. After Happy Birthday, McCartney's Yesterday is the most played song in the world. Why? Despite the fact that it has become a cliché, diminished to Muzak status, a meaningless part of the aural/cultural landscape, McCartney's Yesterday nevertheless still has the power to tease our sublimated emotions and evoke surprising nostalgia and beauty. Considerations of beauty are often a critical part of my artmaking. Both in materials and content, my work deals with the overfamiliar giveaway reality of the street—a sour note often unexpectedly infused with heart wrenching emotion, the lovesong bleated out on a tuba or a single violin competing in vain with an unintelligible, overbearing loudspeaker. On the one hand, there are our individual desires and yearnings, on the other, reality. It is in the gap between them where our dreams and the real bump up against one another, making for odd juxtapositions that breed both quirky beauty and endearing ugliness. Please join me on the web at <http://www.lynnheller.com/html/current.html>, about halfway down the page, to hear the piece.

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