Sensing beauty

Paukenspieler, 1940, by Paul Klee, Kleisterfarbe auf Papier auf Karton, measuring 34.6cm x 21.2 cm. Courtesy of Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Switzerland.
Antiques Magazine is proud to publish for the first time in a British national magazine the work of Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, a celebrated Italian media-theorist, art critic and philosopher. In these extracts from his forthcoming book*, Berardi returns to an age old debate and asks what is beauty in the modern age.

"Modern art and modern philosophy can be said to have converged on a similar problem: both renounced the domain of representation and instead took the conditions of representation as their object."***

The Western philosophical tradition conceives of aesthetics as the theory of beauty and is rather inclusive. Neither Kant nor Hegel managed to define beauty: each of their definitions lacks its object. It would be more useful to conceive of aesthetics as the science of semiotic emanation in its interaction with sensibility. Aesthetics would return to its etymon and, rather than to beauty (a quality of the object), it would refer to experience (the subjective side of the relation to an object), and be concerned with sensibility.

Sensibility can be defined as the faculty that enables us to process information that is non-verbal and cannot be otherwise. Someone who is unable to comprehend moods, emotions, allusions and the non-said - a large part of what constitutes communication and daily affective and social life - is commonly defined as insensitive. Like a thin film, sensibility makes it possible for human beings to conjoin and enter empathic relations, or in other words, to 'regress' to a non-specified and non-codified state of a body without organs that pulsate in unison.

Empathic relations enable the comprehension of signs that are irreducible to information and yet constitute the foundation of inter-human understanding. Sensibility is the faculty of understanding and decoding the unspeakable.

What is the relationship between sensibility and communication, especially in its technological and social forms? According to Paul Klee, the task of creative activity is not to reproduce the visible, but to make visible. Sensibility is the faculty of making visible the conditions for a configuration of the world.

The function of creative activity such as poetry, music, painting, cinema, literature, and architecture, is not to show an existing reality, but to make it possible for a sign formation that shapes reality to be perceived, seen, lived, practiced, and experienced. We could define beauty as the emergence of forms that can be enjoyed in the realm of sensibility. Beauty can be found in symmetry or in a harmony intrinsic to an object, sign or work, but it does not depend on either. A violation of the symmetric order can cause aesthetic pleasure and be no less enjoyable than obeisance to it.

Beauty could be seen as the abeyance of a meaning conventionally attributed to sign formations and of the functionality attributed to an objective conglomerate. Aesthetic appreciation relies on a suspension.

*Head of Hair*, 1910, Luigi Russolo (1885-1947), etching and aquatint, measuring 24cm by 16.3cm. From a private collection to be exhibited at the exhibition titled Luigi Russolo: Life and Works of a Futurist to be held from 4th October to 17th December.
'We don’t know space, we don't see it, we don’t hear it, we don’t perceive it. We are in the midst of it and part of it, but we know nothing about it’ M. C. Escher

of functional considerations, even though it is not at all counterpoised to functionality; in fact, quite the opposite. In beauty, we find a regression to a state of a body without organs, where it is possible to create new constellations of meaning and new functionalities for the objects we experience. What links beauty to pleasure? Pleasure re-concatenates, re-captures, returns, rewinds and recovers a constellation from which conventional meaning has been deducted.

We need not look to symmetry and dissymmetry for an explanation of aesthetic emotion and the pleasure of forms, but to estrangement, an unpredicted deviation in the relationship between sign and meaning. This is the point: the derailing of the predictable relationship between sign and meaning and the discovery of unforeseen and multiple perspectives. Beauty has to do with surprise. Symmetry and dissymmetry are modalities of the configurations of signs and their aesthetic value is dependent on improbablity, unpredictability and strangeness; a distance from the predictable order.

Perhaps beauty is the ironic tolerance of imperfection, of reality and of real life, it is what allows for a relaxation of the tension between an organism and its environment, mind and body, existence and being for death. But it may be something entirely different, like the cruelty of the inexhaustible. Life continuously produces bodies that we cannot to enjoy; they imper turbably pass us by, indifferently brushing against our gaze and scornfully and carelessly standing over and beyond us. Beauty is also the cruelty of this infinite excess of nature, the sudden awareness of the fragility of our conscious organism, the intuition of the possible infinity of experience.

Harmony and disharmony are not extrinsic to the cosmos but are modalities of a relationship between the singular receptive psyche and cosmic becoming, that is to say the whole universe of being. It is here, inner experience in the midst of the immensity of being, that the secret of pleasure and beauty lies.

In the past, history of art and perception the body was associated with the idea of visibility. The body is visible, and this is why artistic representation reproduces it, makes it public and recognizable and the forms of its disciplining possible. Urban architecture, the perspective ordering of human space, takes part in the disciplinary process and makes it possible at the perceptive and epistemic level.

With the advent of digital electronics in late modernity a new space of perception opens up: micro-visual technologies and nanotechnologies offer to the senses and sensibility the possibility of conceiving of the trans-visible dimension of the body, and to operate at that level. Twentieth century paintings, starting from cubism, work on in the framework of trans-visibility: movement, molecules, the becoming other. Francis Bacon's paintings wish to record becoming and grasp the non visible level of form: its mutation and process.

Visionary and psychedelic artists tried to make the sub-visible dimension of organic matter perceivable. In a Lenham gallery
exhibition in New York dedicated to his friends who died of AIDS. Ross Bleckner shows in large canvases of slow and tenuous colours, a possible perception of cellular matter, of its repetitive proliferation and unpredictable and ungovernable mutations: an aesthetic sensibility of the non-visible and search for imaginations of the subliminal.

The relationship between visible and non-visible was truncated by modern rationalism, which relegated the trans-visible to spirituality. This is now under question. Information, the invisible par excellence, has become the main productive motor of social reality: the invisible takes centre stage in the visual scene.

We can distinguish between three orders of invisibility: the purely relational, abstract and conceptual, numbers, relations and algorithms. In this first case, the notion of invisibility questions the relation between reality and mental abstraction. The abstract does not have the same reality as physical things.

Secondly, invisible is what cannot be seen by the naked eye because it is either too small or too big. The sub-visible is no less material than what the naked eye can see. Thanks to microscopes we can see the swarming of sub-visible matter, but how far can the technical ability to descend in the scale of sub-visibility go?

Finally there is a third order of invisibility: that which cannot be seen for cultural, psychic, political reasons, which is hidden, removed, and becomes imperceptible to conscious vision. Vision is a cultural process of selection, discipline, exclusion and visualisation. Those who fanatically regard the border between matter and spirituality as unbridgeable create a fence between the visible and invisible and render it ontologically insuperable: what belongs to the realm of matter is visible, whilst the invisible is that which belongs to spirituality. That is why the icon-phobic tradition warns that 'what is visible is degraded'. Thus the depiction of the visible has been repeatedly rejected and devalued in the name of mystic ascetics, spiritual perception, or entheogenous and ecstatic conceptions of vision. Calligraphic or expressive abstraction were pitted against representation, alongside forms of psychedelic vision capable of putting the human mind in direct contact.

'Sense & Sensuality' is the culmination of a nationwide competition, open to all artists, to create works of art that are accessible to everyone, including visually impaired people.

BlindArt encourages the artists to adopt their own interpretation of this brief. The only stipulation that BlindArt makes is that the artists must allow their works to be explored through touch.

Readers will share our pleasure in the quality of works submitted, some of which BlindArt have kindly allowed us to reproduce here. Theirs is a true extravaganza of contemporary interactive art that encompasses paintings, sculpture and installations, all of which break through traditional hierarchies and barriers in the arts scene by inviting visitors to experience them through all five senses.

'Sense & Sensuality' is an inclusive exhibition that provides large print, Braille; tactile images and audio-description information for visually impaired visitors. BSL and text transcripts are available for deaf people and visitors with hearing loss.

All works are for sale with proceeds going to raise funds for BlindArt projects.

The exhibition is being held at Bankside Gallery, 48 Hopton Street, London, SE1 9JH. It began on the 14th September and continues until 7th October. For more information call 020 7928 752, email info@banksidegallery.com or visit www.banksidegallery.com.

"Anemone" by Dr Kate Wells, heat set polyester and stiffener, measuring 60cm in diameter, part of the Sense & Sensuality exhibition organised by BlindArt.

'Barnacles' by Natasha Lewer, ceramic and flocking, measuring 45cm in diameter, part of the Sense & Sensuality exhibition organised by BlindArt.
with the invisible and the spiritual, the sole
realm worthy of aesthetic attention.

It is still commonly believed that realistic
representation, predominant in the visual
culture of classical modernity from the
Renaissance to pomperian realism up until
Hollywood and pop, is the natural form of
visual expression. It is a modern-centric
prejudice and late modern art re-opened the
debate on the status of visibility itself. Let us
take abstract art for instance.

In the experience of abstract art with
matter, the latter is no longer contained or
constrained in form, but secretes it from the
inside of its veins, vibrations and
decomposition. Alain Besançon directly relates
abstract art (Kandinsky, Malevic, Mondrian) to
a return of iconoclastic tradition, the repulsion
of the visible. According to Jean Claude
Monod (Esprit 1999), Besançon's could be a
partial vision.

In the history of Mediterranean art (Western
and Byzantine) we have often witnessed this
phenomenon, that returns in the form of
abstract art in the twentieth century: the
interpretation of the work becomes an integral
part of its very creation. One cannot judge the
aesthetic value of an icon without knowing the
interpretative system that for the author is
implied in the work. 'In order to see, you must
be initiated' (J. C. Monod: Esprit, p. 141).

Even though the artistic avant-garde of the
last century follows elitist and anti-popular
tendencies, in the works of Duchamp for
instance, what prevails is a phenomenon of
democratisation of visibility, which was
already the explicit intention of baroque art
and the propaganda fides, and comes back in
pop art and advertising. It is not necessary to
be initiated in order to see: seeing is for
everyone, it is the indispensable premise for
everyone to have access to belief, to the
world of religion or consumption. Abstract
art denies the expressive interest of visibility
and turns its back on it in the name of the
formal freedom of the visual sign and
representation. But modernity is usually
turned towards popularisation and depiction.

We can frame the question of visibility also
from the perspective of trans-visibility. Trans-
visibility redefines the visual image starting
from the sub-visible. The sub-visible cannot
be seen by the naked eye even though it is at
the heart of its composition and
decomposition, of the becoming of bodies,
inert, biological and even cerebral matter.
Thus, trans-visibility is not posed from the
point of view of abstract spirituality, but from
that of a more intimate and deeper materiality
that is more subtle than that seen by the eye
and known by the mind through experience.

Impressionism essentially posited this
question. Given that the texture of matter
and its movement are invisible, divisionism
searched for the molecular composition of
light, beyond the molar visibility of shapes.

Futurism aimed to show movement, even
though movement is not visible in itself. We
see bodies in space; we do not see movement
in itself, but its successive states. Visual art
remained locked in a static conception of
depiction/representation since the cinema
made the depiction of movement possible
and the succession of time and movement
reversible. In Futurism we see this visual
awareness of movement as a kinetic
consciousness of painting and graphics.
Futurism renders movement analytically and
places itself before the object (the dog's tail
or the lady's legs in Balla's painting), and
analyses the succession of visible states.

Later, the pictorial works of abstract
expressionists (such as Jackson Pollock)
renders movement by subjectifying it. The
movement of the hand or the body that paints
leaves visible signs of its own invisibility.

Since the end of the avant-garde and its
infiltration in the circuit of social
communication, aesthetic stimuli have
increasingly taken on the form of
advertising, television, design, packaging,
web design, etc. and become pervasive,
insisting, and inseparable from the
information stimuli of which they are now a
complement. The conscious and sensuous
organism is enveloped in a flow of signs that
not only carry information, but also
elements that stimulate and excite
perceptivity. In the past few decades, the
organism has been exposed to a growing
mass of neuro-mobilising stimuli.

The image is not an automatismi, it is a
device. It possesses the dynamic power to
generate and construct projections, interactions
and narrative frameworks that shape reality.
The image selects between the infinite possible
perceptive experiences, constitutes an
imaginary, a field of practicable images, and
thus makes imagination possible, the activity
of projection creates a coherent world of
objects, experiences and relations.

With the shift towards digital electronics, we
leave the realm of recording behind, to enter
that of numeric genesis. In digital electronics,
each sign is made of small fragments of images,
pixels that are composed on the surface of the
screen to form a recognisable mosaic. The
relation between reality and the image is no
longer of recording, but of simulation. Each
single image is the recomposition of minimal
visual units and their flow is itself recombined
in synthetic frames. For the first time in the
history of visual art, the eye is no longer the
origin of the creative process, because the
creation of images does not arise from it.