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LEONARDO THINKS

Opinion: Beauty in the Beast

ISSN No: 1071-4391

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Originally published in: *Leonardo* Vol. 37, No. 3 (2004), p. 175-6

Print: ISSN 0024-094X, Online : ISSN 1530-9282, DOI:

<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/0024094041139508>

In this era of the growing presence of technology in art, a trend well exemplified by digital art, how do we find deeper terms of engagement between art and technology?

I want to suggest here that artists can enlarge our understanding of technology, not by becoming technocrats but by enriching the ways in which we talk about technology. One of the essential modes of enrichment is to invoke the idea of beauty and place it within the domain of technology. By bringing beauty to bear upon technology, we can make technology answerable to the call of beauty, thereby taking it away from an excessive preoccupation with functionality, use-value and efficiency.

But why beauty?

Susan Sontag writes that “it is in art that beauty as an idea, an eternal idea, is best embodied” [1]. Art’s capacity to invoke the idea of beauty, to give it a place of residence within art’s activities, is what makes art unique. Art responds to the question of beauty, and as an activity it generates the idea of beauty.

Art and technology are poles apart. Technology is our beast of burden, doing things for us, whether carrying loads, transporting people or even checking our spelling on the computer. Machines as subservient to humans, as doing the work of and for humans, has been a dominant image of technology. In creating this image of technology we have consistently ignored the possibility of beauty in the beast.

It is not that art has always comfortably co-existed with beauty. Critic Arthur C. Danto notes the disappearance of beauty from the vocabulary and philosophy of art of the 1960s, but goes on to suggest that “the immense esteem in which art continues to be held today is an inheritance of this exalted view of beauty” [2], a view held in the beginning of the 20th century. The high expectations from this exalted view of beauty has actually led to the de-



privileging of beauty in art. Nevertheless, invoking beauty in the context of technology is useful for at least two reasons.

Beauty, from ancient times and in all cultures, has often been associated with morality. Danto goes to the extent of saying that it “was the moral weight that was assigned to beauty that helps us understand why the first generation of the twentieth-century avant-garde found it so urgent to dislodge beauty from its mistaken place in the philosophy of art” [3]. If modernist and avant-garde movements reacted violently against the notion of beauty, it is, as Danto notes, partly a reaction against the moral weight imposed on art.

The association of beauty with morality is perhaps one reason why technology shies away from seriously considering beauty as part of the discourse of technology. Is the neglect of beauty by technology largely catalyzed by the fear of the moral imperative as a parameter of technological development? Bringing beauty to the forefront of judgments about technology would actually introduce a sense of morality into technology. Note that this argument allows us to differentiate between artisanship and technology. Artisanship, placed within certain cultural practices and engaging with the idea of beauty, carries a moral burden, which modern technology refuses to do.

Also, in the words of Sontag, beauty has always been identified with women. On the flip side, technology has always been identified with the masculine. Everything about technology reflects characteristics of the gendered male. This masculine image of technology has no place for the feminine and thus no place for beauty. For both these reasons of morality and gender, technology consciously constructs itself as having no relation to beauty.

Now we can begin to understand how artists can more effectively engage with technology without becoming technocrats themselves. There are two possible ways. One is to bring the discourse of beauty into that of technology, thereby expanding the vocabulary and image of technology. As we well know by now, the way we talk about something can actually fashion that thing. Two, artists can consciously avoid using technology merely as a canvas for their artistic expressions and instead explore ways by which they can let technology answer to the call of beauty.

The historical process in which art set aside its obsession with beauty must now be duplicated in reverse as we ask technology to set aside its obsession with functionality and use-value, and in the process add a dose of beauty to the beast.



Endnotes

[1] Susan Sontag. “An Argument about Beauty,” *Daedalus* (Fall 2002) pp. 21–26.

[2] Arthur C. Danto. “The Abuse of Beauty,” *Daedalus* (Fall 2002) pp. 35–56.

[3] . See Danto [2].

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