

Excerpt from *That Which is Priceless: Beauty, Ugliness and Politics*¹

By Annie Le Brun²

This is a time in which human catastrophes are being added to natural ones, thus abolishing every horizon. And the first consequence of this catastrophic doubling is that, under the pretext of limiting real and symbolic damage [*dégâts*], we are stopping ourselves from looking beyond and seeing the chasm towards which we are more and more certainly advancing.

Here's a new example of this, even if the current precipitation of events renders the discernment of the effects from the causes harder and harder to make. It goes along with the worsening of "too much reality," which is something I mentioned 18 years ago,³ as a consequence of over-the-top commodification, which is inseparable from the rise of computers: too many objects, too many images, too many signs neutralizing each other in a mass of insignificance,⁴ which hasn't stopped invading the landscape so as to conduct therein constant censorship through excess.

The fact is that it will not take a long time for this "reality overload"⁵ to become *too much waste* [*trop de déchets*]. Nuclear waste, chemical waste, organic waste and industrial waste of all kinds, but also wasted beliefs, laws and ideas that drift like so many carcasses and empty shells in the flux of the perishable. If there is a characteristic of this century, it is the disposable that we no longer know where or how to dispose of and even less how to think about.

From this comes an uglification [*enlaidissement*] of the world that progresses without us guarding against it, because it is lesser than the spectacular

¹ *Ce qui n'a pas de prix: Beauté, laideur et politique* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2018). Excerpt provided by the publisher. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 4 January 2019. Footnotes by the translator, except where noted.

² Born in Rennes, France, in 1942, Annie Le Brun met Andre Breton in 1963 and soon after joined the Surrealist group. She was still a member when it dissolved in 1969. Since then, she has gained renown for her poetry, essays and literary criticism. In 1989, she began a correspondence with Guy Debord that lasted until 1993. To date, very few of her many books have been translated into English.

³ *Du trop de réalité* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2000); reprinted by Gallimard in 2004.

⁴ Cf. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Rising Tide of Insignificance* (2003): <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.html>

⁵ The title of Jon E. Graham's translation of *Du trop de réalité*, published by Inner Traditions (Rochester, Vermont) in 2008 was *The Reality Overload: The Modern World's Assault on the Imaginal Realm*.

harmful effects [*nuisances*], which, from one continent to the other, brutalize space, deform forms and distort sounds to the point that our internal landscapes are insidiously modified.

Whether we like it or not, this is an important political matter. Because if it is impossible to define living beauty, which always overturns things to recompose the world in its hitherto unseen light, both of the two totalitarianisms of the 20th century hunted down those works that were loaded with it, so as to impose a palpable terror, the norms of which were interchangeable under Socialist Realism and Hitlerian art. To the point that both regimes fostered the same immorality of the same moralizing kitsch in which the human body was conscripted to be a false witness to the ideological lie.

With a few exceptions, the quasi-totality of revolutionaries have hardly paid any attention to this similarity between the two regimes and were even less preoccupied with envisioning the repercussions of it, but this doesn't change the fact that, since the end of World War II, ugliness has gone unchecked.

Especially over the course of the last twenty years, this uglification [*enlaidissement*] seems to have been accompanied, if not preceded, by an artistic production (a confused combination of the plastic arts and the arts of the spectacle) whose innumerable forms – subsidized or sponsored at great cost – have succeeded, under the increasingly vague notion of “subversion,” in substituting the Möbius strip [*l'envers et l'avers*] of a continuous degradation for any and all representation. And because this false consciousness was being supported by the concurrent fabrication of a counterfeit beauty by the aesthetics of commodification, some have recognized in this situation the mark of an “artistic capitalism.”⁶

This is an apparently contradictory situation, but its increasing normalization reveals that a process of neutralization is now at work to get people to accept each thing and its opposite, but without ever failing to eradicate all traces of negativity.

This is why it would be too simple to think, following Stendhal, that, if “beauty is only the promise of happiness,”⁷ then ugliness is the promise of misfortune.⁸ The risk of such a conclusion would be not seeing how this new “aestheticization of the world,” which the majority of people welcome, involves violence and devastation that, at all levels of the social ladder, worsen the unprecedented *desensitization*, which was begun, moreover, a long time ago – from the theatre to the museum, from the art center to the foundation – through

⁶ Author's note: Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, *L'Esthétisation du monde*, Gallimard, 2013, p. 34.

⁷ Author's note: Stendhal, *De l'Amour*, chap. XVII.

⁸ Cf. Gianfranco Sanguinetti, “Ugliness is the Promise of Misfortune” (1993): <http://www.notbored.org/ugliness.pdf>.

shows, performances and installations in which cynicism was increasingly paired with indifference.

The consequence of all this is the installation of a brazen *order of denial*, which doesn't fail to call into question all the modes of representation, with some ending up devaluing the others in the course of a chain of implosions that produces as many disembodiments. So much so that every [human] being, stripped little by little of what materially [*sensiblement*] connects him or her to the world, finds him or herself both alone and destitute.

Is it said that, to flee this solitude, there remains only the false community of a new servitude that makes a fortune for the "social networks"? Is it said that, to escape from exclusion, one must submit oneself to this domestication?

Something that people believed could never catch up [*rattraper*] now seems to run free in front of their eyes. It isn't their futures or their presents that escape them; it is their dreams. And everything takes place as if people no longer know how to grasp, speak or think about the increasingly wide gap between what they live and the discourse that is supposed to take account of it. So much so that social critique, rigorous though it may be, ends up being no more than musical accompaniment, without any effectiveness, reduced to assuaging the consciences of those who share it. Ever since the crisis became the subject of every debate, people have even said that a multiplicity of critical approaches plays domination's game. The role of specialist has indeed fallen upon those who lead such discussions, which is something that the majority of them seem very satisfied to accept, without even being truly aware of it. But the more these specialists get together, the less they find a common language. With the result that, instead of seeing a critique of the crisis emerge, they only take note of a crisis of critique.

So, why wonder about beauty and the people and things that the ubiquitous threat allows to escape from this dreadful picture? Though no one knows how to define beauty, everyone has experienced the powers of amazement, when suddenly something makes sense, though it previously seemed to make none. Like a flash of lightning, beauty does not let itself be subjugated. And so, for this sole reason, it is worth never forgetting its blaze, even if, before or after the countless questions about the notion of beauty, Rimbaud could write at the very beginning of *Une Saison en enfer*: "One evening, I sat Beauty down on my lap. – And I found her bitter. – And I insulted her."

These are lines we can't read without wondering what connects them to those that, in the last part of the voyage to the end of oneself, contradict them: "That's past. Today I know how to welcome beauty." What happened between April and August 1873, the time of this "season in hell"?

This question pursued me for a long time, until – our situation getting worse and worse – I came to ask myself if Rimbaud’s turnaround, coming in the midst of the gloomiest of times, didn’t represent a possible recourse for us.

It’s as if Rimbaud, after having taken all kinds of risks to desert the roads illuminated by Beauty (recognized as such), he suddenly *saw* that it is always other, that it is always to be reinvented, just like the love he dreamed of.

If he also discerned beauty in “idiotic paintings,” “pictures of acrobats,” “vernacular [*populaire*] ornamentation,” “erotic books without [good] orthography,” “simple rhythms” . . . as well as in the “happiness of animals” or his own “follies,” of which he knows “all the impulses and disasters,” which he lets pass through in surging waves, it is beauty that he welcomes because he has discovered it to be both plural and singular.

This beauty, which he writes without a capital “B,” comes from afar, from far away. His genius was to have sought to seize hold of it as closely as possible to its original [*première*] violence, to run out to meet it through the “deserts of love,” to collide with it in “the blue sky that is black,” even to recognize it when it no longer recognizes itself. And yet to affirm at the same time that “I is an other” [*Je est un autre*] and thus open to each person the sovereignty of all the kingdoms of the singular.

We must also remind him [of what he himself said:] that it is important for all beings to “find the place and the formula.” And he told us the urgency of doing so, at the very moment when the wild accuracy of his clairvoyance made him denounce – a century and a half in advance – what we are subjected to today, day after day: “economic horror,” “the vision of numbers” and the universe that results from it, committed “to the sell priceless Bodies, irrespective of race, world, gender, [or] lineage” and also to sell “voices, the immense unquestionable opulence, which we will never sell.”

In fact, there is nothing of what the inheritors of the vile Second Empire have foisted upon us – speculation, colonization, predation – that wasn’t set alight by his refusal, so that the surprising beauty of what could have been appears amidst the flames. This beauty, as unforeseeable as it is indefinable, shines so brightly that it gets mixed up with that absent future, into which the great wind of his imagination rushes. Inseparable from the revolt that gives birth to it, beauty returns again and again to impose itself as an undreamed-of form of liberty.

This is why what Rimbaud said, what he dreamed, what he revealed, continues, decade after decade, to echo among the very young people who still haven’t capitulated in any way.⁹ The fact that he was, without doubt, the first to

⁹ Cf. Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, “Patti Smith Buys Rimbaud’s Replicated Childhood in France,” *Artnet*, March 23, 2017.

have wagered everything on “Change life”¹⁰ encourages me even more to refer to him when the sinister beginnings of this century seem to want to definitively forget [*ignorer*] him.

Nonetheless, we cannot forget all those who have sought, whatever the circumstances, to “make the source of the rock spring up,”¹¹ to quote Pierre Reverdy. That Reverdy has been splendidly successful persuades us that, following Ignaz Paul Vital Troxler, “there is another world, but it is in this one.”¹²

There is no better justification than that for refusing the order of things. It says that the irruption of the possible and beauty is likely to appear in the midst of that order. Like the irruption that suddenly tears open the gloomy opacity of *1984*, in the way that a young lover removes her clothes in “a magnificent gesture by which a whole civilization seemed to be annihilated.”¹³ The beauty that gets mixed up with poetry, which is “nothing and nowhere,” is, in the eyes of Reverdy, “the manifestation of the irrepressible need for liberty that is in mankind.”¹⁴ It is this certainty that Ossip Mandelstam,¹⁵ who went as far as paying for it with his life, recalled when he said: “What distinguishes poetry from mechanical speech is the fact that poetry awakens us, shakes us up right in the middle of a word.”

I could provide many more examples of this *passionate quest for what has no price*. In fact, those who end up abandoning the desire to make this quest their own in the scintillation of an eternal present are few and far between. The fact that the surging forth of beauty is accompanied by unforeseeable perspectives hasn’t stopped worrying all the powers – this is exactly what they want to take away from us, even from our memories.

How long will we continue to remain indifferent to this situation? To what extent will we continue to contribute to it, even if it is only through our inattention? For how long will we agree to ignore the fact that this is the establishment of a previously unknown type of enslavement, if not *corruption* as well?

¹⁰ A slogan picked up and repeated by Guy Debord, “One More Try if You Want to be Situationists (the SI In and Against Decomposition),” *Potlatch* #29 (5 November 1957); translated by John Shepley.

¹¹ *Author’s note*: Pierre Reverdy, *Cette émotion appelée poésie*, Œuvres complètes, Flammarion, 1974, p. 28.

¹² *Author’s note*: we must remember that this phrase, enunciated by the student of Schelling and Hegel, has been variously attributed to Yeats, Rilke and especially Paul Éluard.

¹³ *Author’s note*: George Orwell, *1984*, Gallimard, 1950, p. 154. [*Translator*: I have quoted directly from the original English.]

¹⁴ *Author’s note*: Pierre Reverdy, *Cette émotion appelée poésie*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ An outspoken Russian-Jewish poet (1891-1938) who was persecuted, arrested and imprisoned twice by Josef Stalin in the 1930s. He eventually died while being transported to a corrective-labor camp.