

Uncontrollable Beauty

Toward a New Aesthetics

EDITED BY BILL BECKLEY
WITH DAVID SHAPIRO

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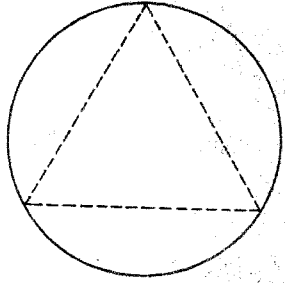
SIAS RHODES

and to

TRISTAN, LIAM AND DANIEL

...with the transformation of negative emotions (ISM, pp. 190-191). This, the most important factor in the whole enneagram, is hardly discussed. There are good reasons for this. The idea of transforming negative emotions suggests a very powerful mode of tantra.²⁸ Certainly, we must have the transformation of the negative into the positive, but here we go beyond the opposites. Even more seriously, it is here that we are concerned with overcoming evil and sin. It is salvation. It is

2nd conscious shock



1st conscious shock

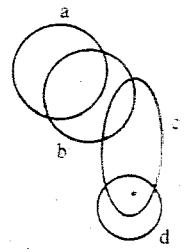
mechanical shock

19.10. The three shocks.

...the defense...
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 ...l ghetto in argu...
 ...p without benefit...
 ...e, if we are lucky...
 ...not used the word

The description here corresponds to what we may find in hermeneutics and the autopoiesis of Varela. It also involves discussions about the nature of consciousness and its essential nature. In general, such interpretations are not concerned with function or will.

- J. G. Bennett, *The Dramatic Universe*, vol. 4, pp. 13-21.
- See the extended discussion of this point in my book.
- I had some interesting discussions with David Bohm about concepts of space. In his view, everything is somewhat interconnected (which later led to his ideas of "implicate order"). Images overlap each other: There is something of *a* in *b*, of *b* in *c*, and there is something of *a* in *d* even though they appear separate.



5. The connection between external form, or the world, and internal qualities, is the topic of the four-term system, or tetrad. The interval between points 3 and 6. In essence, their connection is...

Beauty and Morality

ARTHUR C. DANFLO

ROBERT MOTHERWELL'S *ELEGIES TO THE SPANISH REPUBLIC, OF WHICH HE PAINTED NUMBER 172 (with Blood)* in 1990, is a good place to begin discussing whether there is a conflict between aesthetic excellence and what Richard Schiff designates as "sociopolitical discourse." The *Elegies*, Motherwell said, "reflect the internationalist in me, interested in the historical forces of the twentieth century, with strong feelings about the conflicting forces in it." I once drew a sustained comparison between the *Elegies* and the other great series of paintings by a modern American artist, Richard Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* series. It is reasonably clear, though both these men are abstract painters, that Diebenkorn's inspiration is landscape and his paintings achieve their beauty by way of an internalization of the beauties of the natural world—of sea and sky and beach—but raised to a certain power, as is always true of an art which, in Hegel's thundering phrase, is "born of the spirit and born again." But it might be false to say that Motherwell's *Elegies* owe their beauty to some transfigured natural beauty: they may in fact transfigure terrible suffering instead, which it would be a mistake to view as beautiful at all. "How beautiful those mourning women are beside the shattered posts of their houses, against the morning sky" is not a morally permissible vision. But Motherwell's forms feel like the shawled shapelessness of bent women, alternating with, or set amidst, the ver-

ticals of shattered architectures. It is a stark, black and white setting, tan and perhaps with ochre or crimson, and the reality must in some way be shattering. But the works are unquestionably beautiful, as befits the mood announced by their titles as *elegies*, which are part music and part poetry, whose language and cadence are constrained by the subject of death and loss and which express grief, whether the artist shares it or not. The *Elegies* express, in the most haunting forms and colors, rhythms and proportions, the death of a political reality, of a form of life, of hope institutionalized. Elegy fits one of the great human moods; it is a way of responding artistically to what cannot be endured or what can only be endured. Motherwell was medaled by the Spanish government, after the fall of Franco, for having sustained the only mood morally acceptable through the years of dictatorship, a kind of moral mission unmatched, I think, in twentieth-century art.

Elegies are artistic responses to events the natural emotional response to which is *sorrow*, which *Weber*'s defines as "deep distress and regret (as over the loss of something loved)." I feel we understand too little about the psychology of loss to understand why the creation of beauty is so fitting as a way of marking it—why we bring flowers to the graveside, or to the funeral, or why music of a certain sort defines the mood of mourners. It is as though beauty were a kind of catalyst, transforming raw grief into tranquil sadness, almost, one might say, by putting the loss into a certain philosophical perspective. Kant famously and systematically connects the ascription of beauty to things that in fact please, but if and only if the pleasure can be universalized in a certain way: "The beautiful," he writes "is that which apart from concepts is represented as the object of a universal satisfaction." Kant does not especially speak of pain in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, but it strikes me that symmetry almost demands that there be a concept of beauty ascribed to objects that cause pain when the pain, too, can be universalized or philosophicalized, and so, though the death causes grief, causes as acute a pain in the survivor as the human being knows, since love is abruptly and irrevocably bereft of its object, the conjunction of pain with its universalization as mediated by beauty somehow is felt to be consoling through the consideration that death is universal, that, as the paradigm syllogism puts it, *dryly* and abstractly, all men are mortal. So the conjunction of beauty with the occasion of pain transforms the pain into a kind of muted pleasure. Everyone knows how pain distracts from pain—how we dig our fingernails into our palms to mute the agony of the toothache; here it is pleasure that mutes it, as caused by the music or the words or the cadences of

forms which make the occasion bearable because of the common lot. And the recognition of this may—must, given the ubiquity of the phenomenon—give the bearer a certain strength in the recognition of his or her participation in the very meaning of what it is to be human. So the form of the elegy is philosophical and artistic at once: it gives a kind of meaning that is at once universal.

I will admit that it is not easy to extend this analysis to the *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. Because these are elegies, they universalize through philosophicalization; but it is difficult to assimilate a political defeat to the mood of "queens have died young, and fair." It makes it seem inevitable, the way death is, and this is not, I think, a perspective appropriate to political loss in, so to speak, zero-sum conflicts where, after all, somebody wins. And if this is unavailable, so is beauty. It is one thing when distant empires have collapsed, and all that remain are the ruins, the humbled legs of Ozymandias, King of Kings, and the boastful legend is rendered instantly pathetic by the surrounding wastes and the thin desert winds. We do sentimentalize ruins, which is why they were so stirring to the temperament of the Romantics, who could stand below them and reflect on the transitoriness of glory. But we hardly can do this before raw wreckage, where the blackness is not so much the patination of age and nature, but the charred effect of fire and dried blood. Is the elegiac mood ever appropriate to so near a political catastrophe? Doesn't beauty distance it too abruptly? Have we a moral right to wax elegiac over something that was not all that inevitable or universal or necessary? Think to bring it back to the individual death, to which beauty itself is the human response, when one feels that death was not inevitable (though death abstractly considered is): Suppose one's lover has died of AIDS, and one feels that something should or could have been done, one feels anger that it has not been done, one blames and accuses. Then beauty to which one is spontaneously moved also seems wrong, wrong because one is called upon to act (to "act up") and not to philosophize. Then that may translate back into the appropriate mood for the fall of the Spanish Republic, where elegy conflicts with the impulse to counteraction. (Of course, we then have to look at the dates: the first *Elegy* was done in 1948, whereas the Second Spanish Republic fell to Franco in 1939. Does this matter?)

This might be a criticism to which Motherwell's paintings are subject but to which Jenny Holzer's *Laments* would not be, as that work treats of death abstractly and almost disinterestedly. Kant's thesis is that the judgment of beauty is always disinterested: an object may be deemed beautiful only when it pleases "apart from

all interest." If this is so much as a possible analysis, then the question remains as to whether it is ever right to respond to an event so closely (creeping beauty, and hence whether beauty is appropriate when interest is morally prescribed. I shall return to this issue, so central in discussions of whether beauty is licit in art that is "engaged," as so much art today is; but my immediate concern is to stress that the beauty of Motherwell's *Elegies* is internal to the work. The paintings are not to be admired because they are beautiful, but because their being so is internally connected with the reference and the mood. The beauty is an ingredient in the content of the work, just as it is, in my view, with the cadences of sung or declaimed elegies.

I want to expand a bit on this idea of internal beauty, which has an incidental consequence of showing how the line is to be drawn between natural and artistic beauty. Hegel asserts straight off in his stupendous lectures on aesthetics that the beauty of art is higher than the beauty of nature: "The beauty of art," he writes, "is beauty born of the spirit and born again." People have queried the meaning of this "twice-born" characterization of artistic beauty. I think it must merely have to do with the fact that the beauty in the first instance is internal to the concept of the work in the artist's mind, and then enacted in the work itself, so born twice—first in the idea and then in the embodiment of the idea. Whatever the case, it will be valuable to consider some examples, of which I will cite two, each of which internalizes the phenomenon of beauty in a different way, both times differently from the way Motherwell's *Elegies* internalize it.

First, I want to describe the beauty in (not the beauty of) a Tibetan tangka (scroll painting) of the late nineteenth century, which shows the death of the historical Buddha. The event takes place in an achingly beautiful garden, with green lawns under blue skies, rainbows fluttering like pennants, ornamental birds and plantings, amidst which the Buddha says his last farewells to grieving monks. The beauty of the day and of the place transfer their beauty to the work itself, which is beautiful in ways not typical of tangkas, which can be scary and menacing and repellent. But my sense is that this beauty of is subservient to the beauty in the work. The Buddha, of course, is calm, but the monks are not, which shows that they have as yet not internalized the message of disinterest, or detachment, which is the Buddha's central teaching. They still suffer because, on that theory, they are attached to him. So they have a very long path to tread indeed. They must learn to discipline the propensity to cathet. The Buddha, in this work, demonstrates

his enlightenment by the equanimity with which he faces death, taking leave of the world at its best and most beautiful. Taking leave of this, which the artist arrays before the eyes of the viewer. Anyone, perhaps, can accept with equanimity the loss of a world gone bad and dark and hopeless: in those cases death is an escape, a way out. I once read, in a memoir of the French mystic Marie Bashkirtsev, the young woman's dying words to her mother: "*Maman, Maman, c'était pourtant si beau la vie!*" That *pourtant* is a *cri de coeur* of one who had accepted intellectually the thought that the world is a poor place, which, in fact, her feelings contradicted. But this tangka shows us the world made beautiful by the fact of leaving it, which transcends the natural beauty, just as Hegel says. This, which we see before us, is what we must learn to distance if we wish to be free: So the work is an aesthetic apparatus for the strengthening of the muscles of detachment. "Detach yourself from this, and you are on your way to Buddhahood!" Here, in any case, beauty and death relate in a very different way from that in which they do in elegies, mainly, I suppose, because it is the doctrine of Buddhism that death is something that can be conquered, that it lies within our power to overcome it, and that the common philosophical lot of suffering need not be finally accepted.

A second example is at the antipodes of this. I want to consider certain of Robert Mapplethorpe's images that present the phallus to the viewer as if it were a very pricey product advertised in a magazine like *Vogue*. The images are of a kind to arouse envy and desire in the right sort of audience, and hence the internal beauty of the photography has a rhetorical function, the way the advertising photograph does. Nonetheless, such is the presumed mentality of the targeted audience and such the size of the phallus displayed in each that the object by itself, one might suppose, carries its own rhetoric of magnitude and its own erotic promises, even were the photographs to have been flat and descriptive and documentary. Indeed, we can imagine three photographs of the same phallic male body, one of which is merely documentary, one which uses the artifact of the documentary photograph to make a point about visual honesty, and then one of Mapplethorpe's images in which the whole vocabulary of the glamour shot is marshaled in order to confer on the subject merely shown in the first photograph an aura one would hardly have supposed required, but which, when present, contributes a meaning of its own. Mapplethorpe uses, in particular, backlighting and shadow as we find it in the standard Hollywood black-and-white, star-enhancing photograph, a language that is almost cosmetic in making the star seem beyond and outside the

ordinary human range. Stars already are that, being beautiful people in their own right, but with cosmetics in reality and light-and-shadow in photography, they become transformed into works of art almost, or at least what was suitably named "Matinee Idols." It is quite striking, when one reflects on it, that an artist as certain of the language of visual stardom as Warhol, should have altered the mode in which glamour is conferred upon a face: to be glamorous is to be presented in the mode of a Warhol portrait, regarding the beauty of which one must not be dogmatic one way or another, but in which the idiom of the silkscreened photograph overpainted and in some way blurred with a palette of greens and lavenders and lipstick red that is instantly identifiable as Warhol. Mapplethorpe was a far more conservative artist, appropriating the conventions of the fashion-and-Hollywood black and white to glamorize the phallus and, by indirection and synecdoche, the phallus-bearing body, almost always posed so as to render that feature of itself salient and enlarged, the way the well-endowed female star presses her shoulders forward to accentuate the visual definition of her breasts. Perhaps these pictures demonstrate, if I may use uncritically for a moment the feminist theory of the male gaze, what transpires when the male gaze takes the male rather than the female as its object. That they imply a male audience may just possibly be supported by the reflection that, according to an entry in a recent *Harper's Index*, the length of an erect penis according to males is ten inches and according to females, four inches. In any case, the paradigm of the celebrator and glamorizing phallus shot is Mapplethorpe's *Mark Stevens* (Mr. 1074), 1976, where the subject is arrayed, as if upon an altar, on the upper surface of a kind of podium, and the owner of the subject bends over it in his leather leggings. A vertical triangle at the left and a horizontal one at the right point to Mr. 1074, and the podium itself is haloed with the most intensely white light in the image. The figure itself is severely cropped—at the shoulder, at the back of the legs, at the knee, and at the elbow—as if Mark Stevens's identity was that of his penis. It is a frightening and dehumanizing image, but I offer it as a further example of internal beauty, where the beauty is yoked to the truth of the proposition visually projected in the image, as much so as with the *tangka* of the Buddha's death or Motherwell's *Elegies*.

Once we think of beauty as something "born of the spirit and born again," hence as something intended and then embodied in the work of art if the intention is fulfilled, hence, again, as something that has to be explained through whatever interpretation we give of the work of art, so that we are dealing with

something cognitive rather than merely aesthetic, then a painting—a work of art in general—can have an internal beauty and be a failure if, in fact, the beauty is inappropriate or unfitting. But that means there are works that are better off for not being beautiful, since they might be artistic failures if they were, so to speak, aesthetic successes—that is to say, inappropriately beautiful. With these, I suppose, *motherwilly* too is "born of the spirit and born again." Serendipitously, I have come across an appreciation of a painting by the marginal Pre-Raphaelite Ford Madox Brown entitled *Work*. It depicts the laying of a sewer, and Dinah Birch, a Ruskin specialist, declares: "It is not beautiful. But that is part of Brown's point, for he was after qualities that counted for more than beauty. Its subject was carefully chosen. Brown knew that sewers mattered." They mattered because cholera mattered, and because adequate sanitation was a means of removing the threat of it. This was in mid-Victorian England, and Brown was particularly moved when he saw sewers being dug in Hampstead in 1852, and he realized that here was a subject suited to "the powers of an English painter." He worked on it for thirteen years. There will certainly have been aesthetes who reckoned sewage as an unfit subject for art, and one might have thought that the moony and dreamful Pre-Raphaelites would have been among them, given their general repudiation of the industrial landscape of the time and their thematization of the Middle Ages. The Pre-Raphaelite hero and heroine cannot easily be thought of as having to answer the calls of nature. To be sure, these artists did ideologize what they termed "visual truth," but there are, in fact, too many thematic decisions in *Work* not to suppose it to have been *composed*, and hence it is as dense with artifice as any of the academic works impugned by the Brotherhood. It is that which encourages us to accept Birch's thought that it was a decision on Brown's part not to make the work beautiful, that he would have fought beauty, and hence would have fought the implicit position that something is a fit subject for "the powers of an English painter" only when internal beauty is entailed by the rules of taste appropriate to art. And if she is right, the tacit theory is: this is not a beautiful painting because it treats of a subject more important than what is conventionally accepted as the subject of art, which entails the suitability of beauty. Were he really to have avoided artifice, Brown might have said: the truth is beautiful enough.

One cannot, when construing Brown's central work, refrain from thinking of *Fountain*, Duchamp's celebrated readymade of 1917, which so many of those in the circle around the Arenbergs—his patrons—insisted on aestheticizing, as if this

were his motive in selecting it and then displaying it—as an industrial form that bore certain strong affinities to the admired sculpture of Brancusi. Perhaps he did; perhaps it did; but if so it suggests, then, something about plumbing; fixtures as such, where their formal beauty, if we may assume as much, was in the mode of celebration. The urinal proclaimed rather than disguised its function (it is not, for example, like a television set concealed in an antique armchair) at a time when plumbing itself was not something taken for granted, as it is today. In my building in New York, erected in 1912 by the Bernini of the Upper West Side, Gaetano Ajello, everything was meant to dramatize the difference between modern living and that still-nineteenth-century style of life of the brownstones only then being vacated, as people moved into multiple-unit dwellings such as mine. (The West Side was developed well before Park Avenue.) The architectural historian Christopher Gray pointed out to me that all the pipes and heating fixtures were exposed. There was no central heating—there may not have been much by way of plumbing in the brownstones—so the new tenants were proclaiming their change of lifestyle with features which, a generation later, would be buried in the walls. So pipes and porcelain would not be merely functional: They would exhibit their function as emblems. Duchamp himself said at one point that plumbing was the art of America, the urinal being then a literalization of this. But, in any case, its beauty, as I suppose it must have been, did not arise by way of an effort to deny or to repress excremental function, but to transfigure it in some way: The urinal is the point at which the human being interacts with the system that transports waste back into the natural world. Its whiteness is a metaphor for cleanliness. But this is something of a digression.

I want now to return to the consideration that, if beauty is internally connected to the content of a work, it can be a criticism of a work that it is beautiful when it is inappropriate for it to be so. A good case of this kind of criticism is in a review by Richard Dornmont of John Richardson's *Life of Picasso*. "It now seems odd," Dornmont writes,

that for one moment Picasso thought that Puvis de Chavannes's decorative classicism might be an adequate conduit for the tragic emotions he sought to express in the series of paintings inspired by the syphilitic prostitutes in the Saint-Lazare prison, but he did. Many of his gorgeously maudlin paintings of these lonely figures shuffling across empty landscapes or huddled in the white moonlight are

fundamentally phoney because their seductive beauty is, at odds, with the genuine misery on which they are based.

* * *

I am uncertain of this assessment, simply because I am uncertain of its implications for Motherwell's *Elegies*. What artistic address is appropriate to the depiction of failed prostitutes? A clear documentary style conveys one message, a depiction embodying rhetorical anger, another. Picasso need not have painted the whores at all, but it seemed a natural subject for someone who shared the late nineteenth century's sentimentalizing attitude toward such women, a kind of Baudelairean lyricism. There can be little question that the sentimentalization of suffering gave a kind of market to such works—think of how moved audiences still are by cold, hunger, poverty, sickness, and death in *La Bohème*. Richardson writes, on the other hand, that "there is a hint of eroticism, even of sadism, to their portrayal." In a way, Picasso beautified the women because he relished the idea of a beautiful woman being caused to suffer. An ugly woman, or a woman rendered ugly by the harshness of her circumstances, blocks off the possibility of this perverted pleasure. Think, after all, of the history of depicting female victims, naked and chained to rocks, awaiting their rescuers. No one, presumably, would be interested in rescuing a hag, or a woman shown starved and emaciated. But this means that, by and large, beauty in the depiction of such victims comes in for a moral criticism connected not so much with "the gaze" as with the fact that the gazer takes pleasure in the agonies of a beautiful female. So Picasso's works from this period are not altogether phoney: They belong to a certain tradition, in which the use of beauty is perverse. Perhaps the right way to depict such victims, from a moral point of view, is to exclude any such pleasure and hence to exclude beauty in favor of documentation or indignation. In any case, it is important to recognize that, if this is true, then it is incorrect, on Dornmont's part, to speak of Picasso learning "to do without the consolation of visual beauty." Beauty in such cases is not a consolation but a relish, a device for enhancing the appetite, for taking pleasure in the spectacle of suffering. Indeed, Richardson says that "Picasso would describe women with some relish as 'suffering machines.'" But that then raises the question of whether Picasso's subjects were not always victims of his style, of his imposing his will by rearranging their bodies to suit his appetite.

Against these considerations it is somewhat difficult to accept Dornmont's

assessment that Picasso's eschewal of beauty "is what makes him an infinitely greater artist than Matisse," as if Matisse could not live without the "convulsion." In truth, it would be very difficult to accept the claim that Matisse's *Blue Nude* is at all beautiful: she is fierce and powerful and sufficiently ugly so that voyeurism seems ruled out, let alone arousal—almost as if the ugliness were a sort of veil of modesty with which Matisse covered her nakedness. Still, there is justification, in general, for Dormont's claim, in that the world Matisse's works depict is a world of beauty, and the works themselves belong to the world they show. Matisse is absolutely coherent in this way, and a hedonist and voluptuary rather than a sadist: He has sought to create a world that excludes suffering and hence the pleasure that might be taken in it. His characteristic corpus has the aesthetic quality of a medieval garden—a garden of love—from whose precincts everything inconsistent with the atmosphere of beauty has been excluded. And to be in the presence of a Matisse is to look into that garden and to be in the presence of—an embodiment of—the spirit of the garden: a fragment of the earthly paradise. I am extremely hesitant, on the basis of this comparison, to see him as inferior to Picasso, let alone "infinitely" inferior, but Dormont's claim that he is so seems clearly based on some disapproval of beauty as an aesthetic quality to be at all sought after or used. As I see it, in his view beauty is a consolation, and consolation means mitigating the bitter truth, which it is morally more admirable to admit and to face than to deny. And to the degree that this represents the current attitude, it is not difficult to see what has happened to beauty in contemporary art. It is not art's business to console. If beauty is perceived as consolatory, then it is morally inconsistent with the indignation appropriate to an accusatory art.

Let us return to a work in the elegiac mode, and one, moreover, as with Motherwell's paintings, where the beauty seems internally linked to the attitude the artist undertakes to arouse toward the subject of the work, in this case the American dead in Vietnam memorialized in Maya Lin's astonishing work. The color, the way the work seems to reach out its wings to embrace the viewer, as if dead and living were folded together in an angelic embrace, almost unflinchingly bringing tears to the eyes of visitors to the site, and it will be interesting for future generations to see whether this does not continue to be the case, long after there are any of those left who call the fallen by the names that denote them on the surface of the work, or who remember the raw agony raised in the American breast

by the Vietnam conflict. At least it does this now, and what is astonishing is that this agony, which expressed itself in demonstrations, in flag burnings, in shouts and trawlings, should have so suddenly been replaced with elegiac feeling. The interesting question is the degree to which the memorial itself was a catalyst in this change. The narrative of the memorial by the man who brought it about, Jan "Gungy," is called "To Heal a Nation," and I know of few cases other than the Vietnam Memorial where it is possible to suppose that a work of art in fact achieved such a consolatory and healing effect. Some may feel the wound should never have healed, that we should persist in a posture of rage, rage against a polity that did what we did in Vietnam. The memorial belongs to a perspective much broader, much more philosophical, a perspective which, as I said in connection with Motherwell, puts us above and outside the battle, seeing it from the perspective of eternity, as Spinoza phrases it. And there may be an essential conflict as to whether it is morally right to be philosophical about it in such a way. Is it morally right to be philosophical about the things that seem instead to call for action and change? To say, in connection with sexual aggression against women, that men will be men, as if that were an eternal truth? Or, to take another case, to use Christ's saying the poor we shall always have with us as an excuse for doing nothing about the homeless? If beauty in such cases is linked with being philosophical, there are clear arguments against the moral appropriateness of beauty.

But then there is a question of the appropriateness of art as well, for even if the art is not beautiful, art itself is already internally enough connected to philosophy so that simply making art at all, rather than acting directly where it is possible to act directly, raises questions of moral priority. Consider, in this light, the work by Chris Burden called *The Other Vietnam Memorial*, this one bearing the names of the Vietnamese fallen. Now, it would be wonderful if we as a nation could feel toward the enemy dead what we feel toward our own, but that requires a stance perhaps too philosophical to expect human beings who fight wars in the first place to take. The difficulty, nevertheless, with Chris Burden's piece is that it merely reminds us the enemy died as well, without in any interesting way acting upon our hearts. His work is not beautiful, and, in fact, it is difficult to say what aesthetic qualities it has. It, in any case, does not touch the heart. It consists of several wings attached, like those of a bulletin board, to a central pole. Each one holds a sheet of metal on which are etched, in letters too tiny to read without glasses,

the names of Vietnamese. These names as names mean nothing to us, as the individuals are generic and stereotyped, though doubtless there are those, unfortunately also generic and stereotypical for us, who loved and cared for and mourned the individual denoted by the name that is abstract for us. If Burden's piece were a model for a work to be built, on a large scale, then it is possible that that work would induce feelings the model barely enables us to foresee. But we could not stand in front of the names and read them if it were any larger, and my sense is that this is the work, rather than the model for the work. And my sense further is that the work is not a success: It does not activate any feeling to speak of toward its subject that we might not have had before, so that we walk away with a shrug, an "Oh yeah." It does not help the dead and it does not move the living, and in the end it seems merely a clever idea, almost a gimmick, a kind of moralizing toy. Everything about it as art is wrong, given its subject and its intentions. And because it fails as art, it fails morally, extenuated only by the presumed good intentions of the artist. It should not, if one is seriously interested in causing certain attitudes in viewers, stifle the very possibility of those attitudes.

That is always a danger in activist art, I am afraid. I can understand how the activist should wish to avoid beauty, simply because beauty induces the wrong perspective on whatever it is the activist wants something done about. A work meant to arouse concern about AIDS in the 1991 Whitney Biennial—*AIDS Timeline*—is a case in point. It was, one felt, deliberately scruffy, as if its message was: There is nothing beautiful about AIDS. It had the look of a junior high school project, sincere, jejune, callow. One felt almost more compassion for the artists than for the victims of the disease. They were moving in their earnestness, their fecklessness, their impotence. But they failed artistically if their aim was to enlist art as an ally in their campaign. I don't say it cannot be done, but trying and failing may be just measurably worse than not trying at all.

Ours, however, is an age of indignation, and the lesson just mentioned will take a while to learn if it is true. The lesson is that art has its limits as a moral arm. There are things it can do and things it cannot. It can do, one might say, what philosophy can do, and what beauty can do. But that may mean that philosophy, too, has its limits as a moral arm. There is something terribly deep in Hegel's thought about the bird of wisdom taking flight only with the falling of the dusk. What another philosopher called the Great Noon tide, the time of day appropriate to

action and change, may not be appropriate either for philosophy or for art. It is the moment of interest, and Kant may just be right that interest and beauty are incompatible. Interest and art may be incompatible, but it is not easy to see that this is something the Age of Indignation can accept—it is, rather, something else to be indignant about. So beauty may be in for rather a long exile.