

**Beauty and Darkness,
Ruin and Death**



1. Once in a ragged flower garden on a late August afternoon,

I wrote an essay about beauty. It was not an essay like writing teachers tell you to do... My essay had no structure except the record of my passing experience driven by my sensuality and the feeling of being one with the flowers, the sky and the setting sun—I've always been hot for skies and sunsets—being at one with this birthing and living, seeding and dying world of flowers and sky. I then thought this beauty is real and I should write an essay to say so.



2. “What is beauty?” I wrote,
and what is my sensuality without which how could beauty be? What is the deep connection between my body’s strongest hungers and this late, clear sun that flows among the trees and brings every leaf and shadow and all this air to life... What is beauty, what is sensuality and what am I in this late, clear, still afternoon before the sunset comes?



3. Well, passing from perception to question,

from question to thought: passing from sensual hunger to desire, from desire to the stillness of desire in beauty...

Beauty is, as is so much else in life, sometimes true, sometimes false, and usually a tangle of both. Beauty in art, I guess, leads us to the peace that is not a call to action. Beauty in art, I guess, is the opposite of that art of power which I so desired during my stormier years. The beauty kind of art perhaps belongs only to those who have lived out the storm... is maybe only for the consolation, for the soothing together of castaways after a shipwreck... but, when you've lived most of your life in a storm, how do you know you're alive when the sky clears? Fuck consolation, uproar is what life is all about.



4. Well, putting aside uproar and whatever may be the arts of power,
to keep on for a moment with the stillness of beauty... two kinds: true and false.

True beauty is those late summer flowers in their sunset, false beauty is to claim the eternal round of the life of flowers is proof my friend who has pancreatic cancer will not die (he has maybe six months).



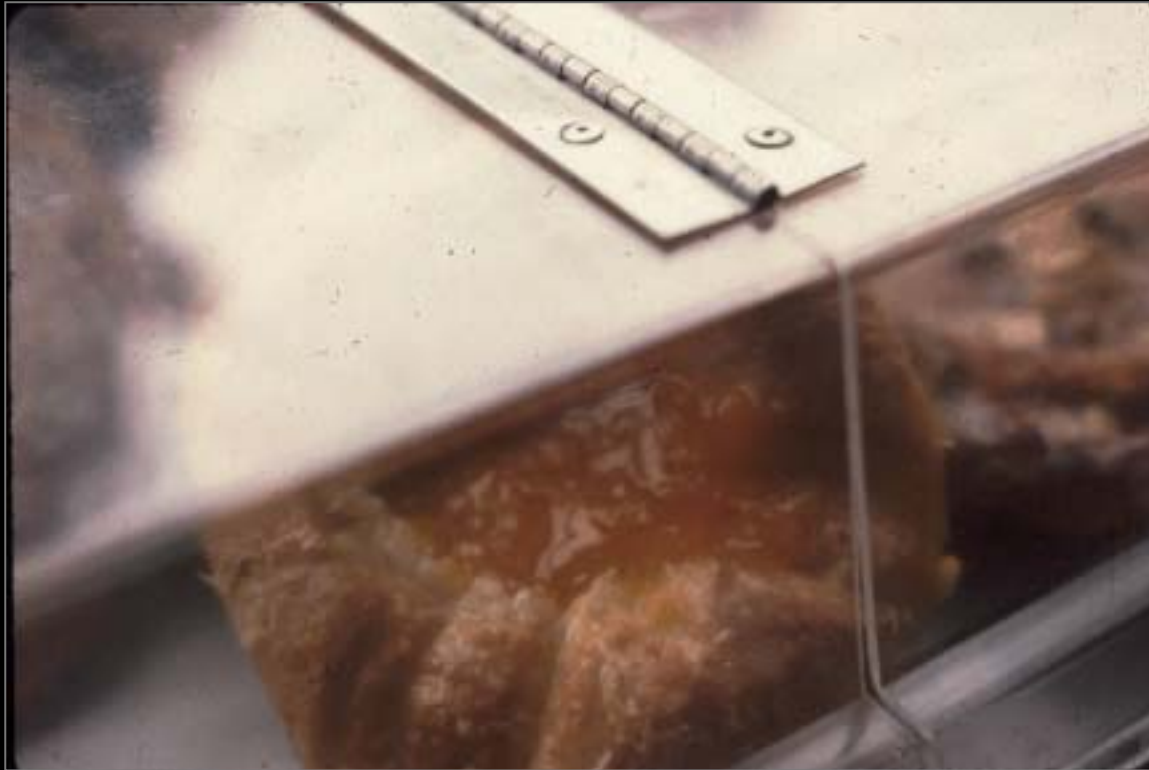
5. False beauty used to be called meretricious—

using one truth (that the flower is only a day or two of the years' long cycles of the lives of plants) to hide another, unwanted truth (that my friend will die). Sure, plants live nearly forever in the wholeness of their species; and in that same way, us humans go on as humanity for millions of years. But my individual friend will die.

Meretricious—to use that adjective for false beauty would be itself meretricious. It's the big words hiding simple meanings that got beauty in trouble in the first place. It must have been about 1900 that most people began to shun beauty altogether. She had lost her virginity as must we all would we live and not die; but in losing her virginity she had become not fertile but only promiscuous, her name stuck onto everything everywhere...



6. I saw it once written on a blackboard on a bedroom wall,
a room used for more couplings than I could ever count—“Promiscuity is only just
once trying to get it right.” Yes, beauty got used a lot, not so much trying to get it
right, I think, as trying to hide so much that was wrong. (My friend dying of
pancreatic cancer, your friends of AIDs—I have a couple of those too)



7. When is beauty false?

Beauty is false when it is spread upon the darkness and the horror and the pain and the violence of the world like sugar on a Danish. That sugar on the Danish gives us an early morning high, a false energy stolen and burnt up from our own body's long collected store. That false beauty gives us a false security stolen and squandered from our own soul's long, slow growth to peace.



8. The sun fades now toward the horizon, toward the dark.

Flowers fill with twilight, and there is a coolness in the first wind of evening. Beauty remains. So does horror.

Give a present to the coming generations. Give them beauty, give them peace. Yes, this time get it right before you die.



9. Darkness and Ruin.

Well, you know, the world is not all nice. The Chinese said it and we all always knew it, even when beauty—the tart with the cute tattoos and sweet little belly button—hides the dark part... the crabs and STD's.



10. Darfur...



11. Iraq...



12. The Brazilian Mines...



13. The Homeless...



14. The great world of confusion...



15. and every little death in it.



*Ceux que Mars entretient de ses actes meschans
Accommodent ainsi les pauvres gens des champs*

*Ils les font prisonniers ils brulent leurs villages,
Et sur le bestail mesme exercent des rouages,*

*Sans que la peur des Loix non plus que le deuil,
Ny les pleurs et les cris les puissent effouvoier . 7*

16. And, yes, we can make art
about those “old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago”



17. And, yes, we can make art
about those “old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago”

Their “rough justice”...



19. Your dying sister...



20. Your perfect scream...



21. Your "Premonition of Civil War with Baked Beans"...

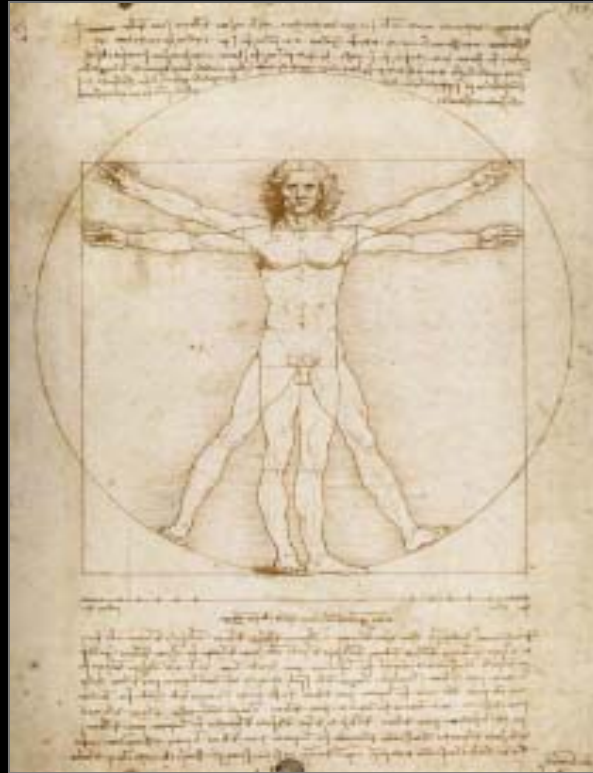


22. Your news of the bombing...



23. We can make art out of these, but what is their beauty?

How can we make their beauty and be true to the darkening,
true to all the sad, black, ugly hurting and dying truths in the world? .



24. What is beauty anyway that can encompass its opposite without lying?

I will claim that true beauty in art is formal power transcending subject matter, a formal power that locks in on and reflects the organic unity of the human body and its place in the wholeness of space and time... the body in “cosmos.”



25. *Prove it—*

Beauty is not a “thing,” it is a quality, and the qualities of things

are in **us**, not them. A sad looking tree is not sad, its shapes are in our sadnessess.

Warm colors are not warm, cool colors are not cool—those are our associations with them. And some lines are “lyrical,” others “jagged?” Again, that’s us, not the lines.

Beauty too, that’s **our** feeling about something, it’s not in the thing itself. My raggedy flower garden—a mess of plants and bugs, rot and death in the sunshine—but my experience: beautiful.



26. The esthetic experience is the experience of union,
it is when we feel our senses join with something outside us. When you work on your painting, you express your body/mind in colors and shapes, gestures and materials, you quite literally extrude your inner experience out into an external object... and when I look at your painting, I join my body/mind, my senses/knowledge/feelings with the object you have made from yours. We are together in that moment... the esthetic moment



26. What is the particular quality of the esthetic moment that we might call “beautiful?” Based on my adventure in the garden, I am going to claim that the feeling in us that we call beautiful and attribute to a garden or a sunset, a painting or a corpse is the particular esthetic joining that makes our bodies harmonize in themselves and with the external object of perception.



28. We have internal perceptions of which we are largely unconscious (the “autonomic nervous system”). And we have external perceptions—the big bad world out there. When internal and external perceptions sing together, then we have just once got it right and we think, “Oh, beautiful.”



29. Sometimes the internal and the external sing together only a little bit and we think I guess it's OK—mediocre. Sometimes they sing together a lot, and we think Good! Then once in a while they sing enormously and our body/mind vibrates far more than we ever knew—that's Sublime...

Like one summer afternoon when I went looking for a friend living in the country. I couldn't find him, but came home and made this. I thought it was sublime.



30. So, you can see I believe in the beautiful and the horrible,
the mediocre and the sublime; and because of the passion of my beliefs, I try to
convince you (Tolstoi said “Art is the infection of feeling, from one person to
another”) and if you are convinced, the possibilities of my belief are shored up for me.



31. Yes, beauty and the sublime are only in us,

but because we are artists we can do the best we can to externalize into distinct objects the feeling in us—beauty or horror—so that others with less time or feeling, less opportunity to experience—can experience those feelings as their own.

Farm workers grow food for us to eat, oil drillers get oil so we can drive; we make art so farmers and oil drillers and everyone else can experience the beauty that is, we hope, the sublime...



To see a world in a grain of sand
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
To hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

