



Sensing beauty

*Paukspieler, 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 ▶



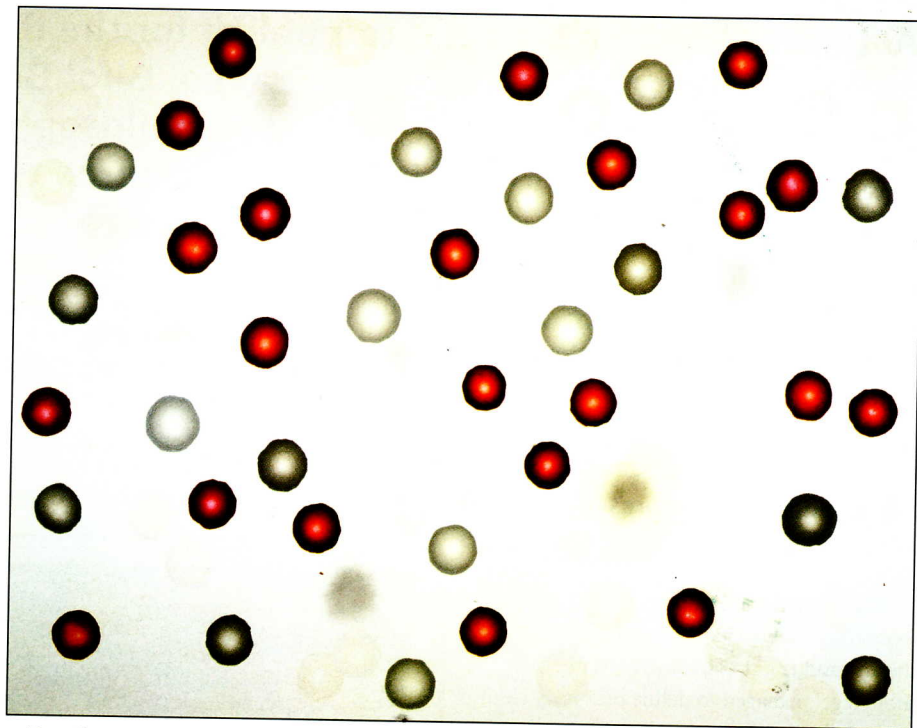
'Head of Hair', 1910, Luigi Russolo (1885-1947), etching and aquatint, measuring 24cm by 16.3cm. From a private collection to be exhibited at the exhibition titled Luigi Russolo: Life and Works of a Futurist to be held from 4th October to 17th December.

'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 improbability, 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



'Spot' by Ross Bleckner, 2001, oil on linen, measuring 213.4cm by 274.3cm, courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York.

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 imperturbably pass us by, indifferently brushing against our gaze and scornfully and carelessly standing over and beyond us. Beauty is also the cruelty of

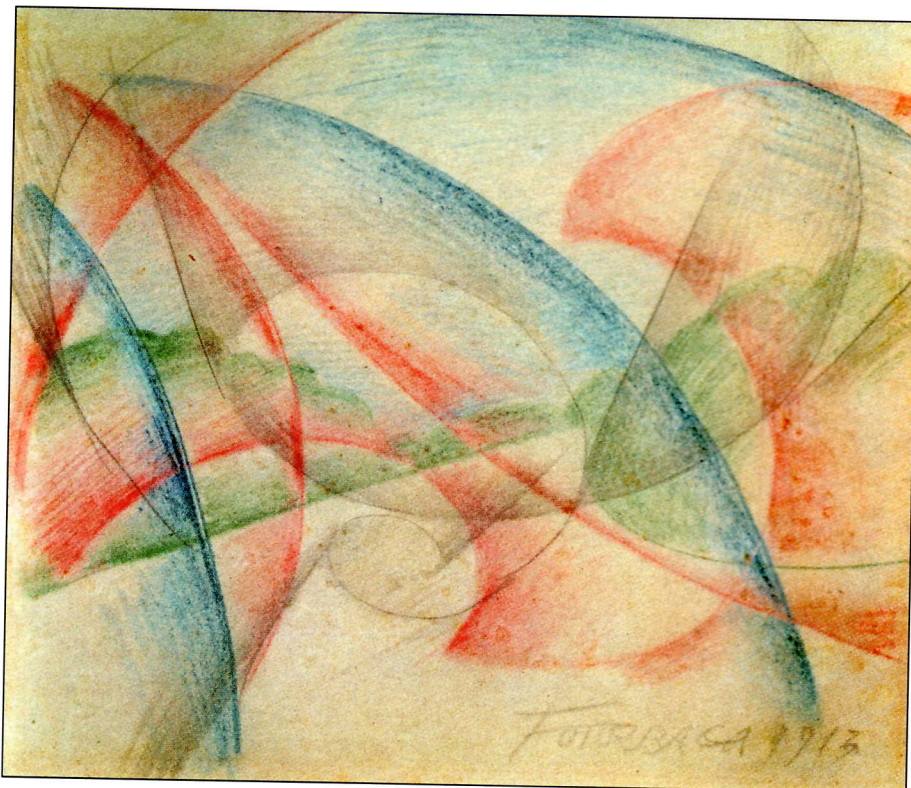
this infinite excess of nature, the sudden awareness of the fragility of our conscious organism, the intuition of the possible infinity of experience.

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 recognisable 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



'Speeding Automobile', 1913, by Giacomo Balla (1871-1958), coloured crayons and pencil on paper, measuring 25cm by 28.5cm, from the Italian Abstraction 1910-1960 exhibition of the Estorick Collection that ran from 28th June to 24th September.

exhibition in New York dedicated to his friends who died of AIDS, Ross Bleckner shows in large canvas 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.

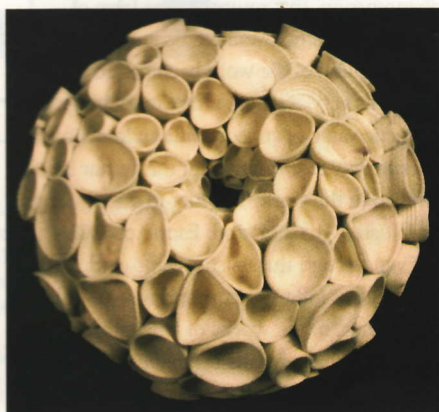
The relationship between visible and non-visible was truncated by modern rationalism, which relegated the trans-visible to spirituality. This is now under question. Information, the invisible par excellence, has become the main productive motor of social reality: the invisible takes centre stage in the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



'Barnacles' by Natasha Lewer, ceramic and flocking, measuring 45cm in diameter, part of the Sense & Sensuality exhibition organised by BlindArt.



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

BlindArt



Sense & Sensuality

This year sees the return of the second annual exhibition **Sense & Sensuality** organised by **BlindArt**, a pioneering charity that promotes artistic excellence regardless of visual ability. They promote works of art for and by visually impaired as well as sighted artists and showcase them side by side, challenging the public to tell the difference.

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.



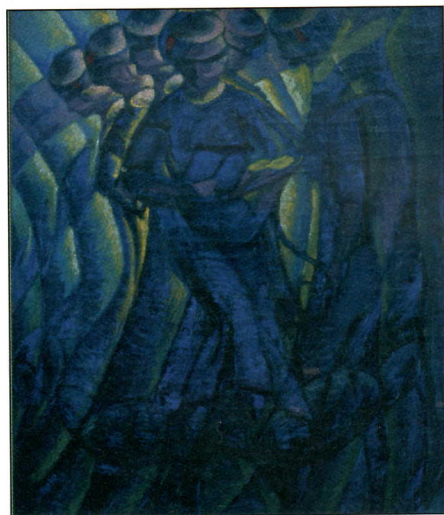
Archipelago by Stephen Farley, mixed media, measuring 105cm by 45cm by 5.5cm, part of the *Sense & Sensuality* exhibition organised by BlindArt.

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 pompier 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 (Kandinski, 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



'Plastic synthesis of the movements of a woman', Luigi Russolo (1885-1947), from 1912-13, oil on board, measuring 85.5cm by 65cm, courtesy of the Musée de Grenoble and the Estorick Collection, to be exhibited at the north London gallery from 4th October to 17th December.

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 automatism, 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 imagin/action 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 recombination 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. □

* The book is titled '*&, Conjunction, connection, sensibility: Erotism and aesthetics*' and will be available in 2007.

** From the introduction to Francis Bacon: *The Logic of Sensation*