

Penumbra(a) 2: Beauty

Beauty, the Beautiful, and the Subject

Editors' Introduction

In and with beauty, one finds oneself in a zone beyond meaning and words. After all, when struck by beauty, doesn't one feel at a loss for words to explain or describe it? And doesn't one feel they have no recourse to the norms, ideals, beliefs, and concepts delimited by culture and civilization that could help them account for their experience? How, then, in the absence of words and sociocultural repertoires, can one speak — with and to others — of the encounter with the beautiful? How to speak of the thing which, as Shanna Carlson de la Torre writes in "*Desidero*, for the Love of the Thing and the Word," pushes one to "the very doorstep of the witches of the wilderness"ⁱ where beauty and horror are hard to tell apart? If such an encounter entails consequences one can neither foresee nor control, it is because this thing pertains to the stuff of the unconscious experience that unfolds at and beyond the limits of identity and language, reverberating in and through the body. In "The Subject of the Quest," Willy Apollon defines the thing as that which makes us human. The thing makes us human because it speaks: it speaks there where language cannot reach.ⁱⁱ "This human

i 128.

ii Apollon makes a distinction between speech and language. Language defines the structure of the social link and works to control and delimit creativity, whereas speech precedes language and manifests the "power of representation and creation" specific to humanity (5). Speech, therefore, has an aesthetic dimension. In Jeffrey S. Librett's essay, "speech as an aesthetic

‘thing’ that speaks,”ⁱⁱⁱ Apollon writes with regard to the work of the thing in the child’s life:

seeks a space for the object that already haunts the child, founding his or her desire for something else (...). The child thus has the same irreducible experience that for tens of thousands of years has already marked the humanity that came before the child, giving rise to creations whose impact we cannot yet imagine.^{iv}

The human thing speaks because it seeks. If we cannot yet imagine the impact of creations propelled by this thing, it is indeed because the quest of desire that it mobilizes is concerned with something else: the precious object which does not exist in perceptible reality and exceeds the realm of predictability and conceivability. The quest of desire — for something else that cannot be anything else because it pertains to an absolutely singular experience of the unconscious — has an aesthetic and ethical dimension which provokes the feeling of the beautiful. For Apollon, the beautiful is the feeling that “articulates the individual to forms that transcend the limits of his or her existence”^v and that the quest of desire works to preserve beyond “the limits of culture” and “controls of civilizations.”^{vi} This articulation has consequences for the human being who, from now on, will have to grapple with something that exceeds the limits of their individual as well as collective

act and aesthetic activity as a mode of speech (...) participates in the *fullness and emptiness of language* as the language of both the collective and — resistently — all the other singularities” (“The Aesthetic Supplement in Willy Apollon,” 69).

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existence. Following Apollon, Jeffrey S. Librett and Heidi Arsenault's essays approach the beautiful as a *witness* to the *manifestation* of the unconscious that falls out of language. This manifestation comes to the fore not only in the experience of an analysand but also — as Librett stresses in “The Aesthetic Supplement in Willy Apollon” — in the adolescent experience of the defect of language and loss of support and stability from the Other. It is precisely this experience that necessitates a singular “aesthetics of the beautiful” — of “hovering in half-blindness and half-emptiness between the imaginary and the symbolic dimensions, in an essential relation with the real.”^{vii} Turning our attention to the aesthetic experience of children who choose not to enter into a relationship of dependence on others, Arsenault's “Beauty in Play” further suggests that if the adult took the risk of joining the nonspeaking child in their play with the bubble bottle rolling across the table, they could be given a chance to bear witness to the beautiful manifestation. And if accompanying the child in their choice of “dependence on things” over “dependence on people” is beautiful, it is indeed also because it offers a chance to build new, unforeseen relationships based on the discovery that “it is possible to go farther in experience with others, than it is possible to go alone.”^{viii} Along similar lines, Leah Gipson and Richard Reinhardt's “Against Diagnosing the Spirit” highlights the possibilities that open from a change of ethical position on the part of clinicians-in-training to one of “welcoming the speech of the *subject*,” which implies suspending the diagnosis of what was in religion called “spirit possession” in order to rediscover it as beautiful.^{ix}

Where the words are failing and the signifiers are lacking, play becomes necessary to transmit and preserve the beautiful. As testified by Bracha L. Ettinger and Ella Bern's pieces, the same can go for paint-

vii 67-68.

viii 33-34.

ix 98.

ing, drawing, sketching, or writing. Our issue features visual works by three artists that interact with the essays in different ways. Bern proposes an articulation of visual, essayistic, and poetic modes, whereas Ettinger, whose essay discusses “artworking,” offers her own artworks as scansion. An image of a 2002 Louise Bourgeois lithography accompanies Carlson de la Torre’s essay and the other voices that inhabit it. In Bern’s “A Bird’s-Eye View,” the artwork — like other modes of creative expression which also include clinical work — is an act founded on desire that “will ever recreate and rediscover itself like a shapeshifter” to find a path for the unsayable and unaddressable within oneself.^x It is in the act that something of one’s singular desire is shared and relayed to others. In Ettinger’s “And My Heart, Wound-Space With-In Me,” desire appears to “turn the interior space of the painting, which matters to living beings, into beauty.”^{xi} It works to make something appear that is “in-for the human.”^{xii} Here, beauty is not simply about creating an artwork to express oneself, in the sense of expressing one’s personality or identity; rather, it is about artworking that involves “self-fragilization”^{xiii} and bearing witness to “the witnessed other” — “in me beyond me.”^{xiv} This “transgression of the self [*biloul* — חילול]” at stake in artworking “dances [*meholel* — מחולל]”^{xv} to preserve “a reverberating relay of an experience” radiating from “the invisible kernel of the thing”^{xvi} by transmitting it from the invisible into the visible. Indeed, to artwork is to be faithful to the “thing in the breath-color-line of the spirit in the soul;”^{xvii} it is to be faithful to the painting’s “interior”

x 166.

xi 200.

xii 183.

xiii 194.

xiv 187.

xv 186.

xvi 206.

xvii 206.

that breathes and links to “the internal soul of the world.”^{xviii} Here, it is not only painting but also poetry that preserves and carries — bearing witness to “an *almost-impossible* witnessing.”^{xix}

Our *Penumbra(a)* journal issue presents work attuned to a sensibility for speech in excess of language and to efforts at creating spaces for it that necessarily refuse definition by disciplinary conventions and limits. Thus the essays in this issue strategically enter into conversations with poetic works, such as Paul Celan’s poetry and E.T.A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman,” but also recent horror films such as *The Witch*, *Suspiria*, and *His House*, as well as with the phenomena of “possession by voices” in Haitian Vodou. Above all, these essays engage, particularly but not exclusively, with Lacanian psychoanalysis. As our descriptions of some of the contributions highlight, several of the essays in the issue engage with or are even oriented by the metapsychology Apollon has developed after Lacan in the age of *mondialisation*, which assigns a crucial role to notions of the beautiful and the sublime, as well as of the human subject as involved with the thing that transcends culture and civilization. We therefore also present two of Apollon’s own essays: first, the English translation for “Le sujet de la quête,” a 2017 address to members of the Freudian School of Quebec (ÉfQ) that offers his view of psychoanalysis today, and in particular of the subject of the unconscious and its stakes, which involve an important aesthetic dimension. The other essay is a collaborative English translation of an early philosophical text, a chapter of his 1976 book *Le vaudou: Un espace pour les “voix,”* which is the result of his doctoral dissertation, directed by Gilles Deleuze. In “Writing and the Voice,” writing is a (Western) machinery that attempts to conquer and evacuate the voice “torn and traversed by multiple drives illegible to any institution.”^{xx} Apollon’s study of Haitian Vodou is an attempt to subvert writing, in order to let

xviii 199.

xix 206.

xx 75.

the voice's libidinal force to course through it, rather than allowing this force to be limited or even become exhausted in the signifier. This resonates with what for Carlson de la Torre is at stake in writing — and in beauty: an aesthetic articulation of the drive at work in the body. Thus, it is about finding words for that which is beyond words. Turning to the life and writing of medieval mystic Marguerite Porete burned at the stake, Carlson de la Torre's piece discusses the ethics of the subject who "chose to live and die both for the love of that which they cannot say and for the love of the words that failed to say it."^{xxi} Indeed, this ethics necessitated by the beautiful also works — as Vanessa Sinclair suggests in her piece "On Beauty, War, and Artistic Innovation" — against tyranny and war. Because in and with beauty, "the usual rules need not apply."^{xxii} If tyrants have been so eager to destroy artifacts and artworks, it is because beauty hits us in a way that we cannot foresee. Beyond the limits of cultures and civilizations, beyond the limits of identity, in service of the human.

Indeed, if Freud's desire for beauty — for upholding the unconscious experience which language cannot anchor — gave rise to psychoanalysis, then psychoanalysis must continue to strive to welcome the beautiful. Psychoanalysis must tune in to the manifold registers and reverberations of the beautiful in service of the human thing that falls out of language yet insists on expression.

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^{xxi} 144-145.

^{xxii} 148.