



Aesthetics after the End of Art: An Interview with Susan Buck-Morss

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# *Aesthetics after the End of Art*

## An Interview with Susan Buck-Morss

Grant H. Kester

38

Susan Buck-Morss teaches political philosophy and social theory in the Department of Government at Cornell University. She is widely recognized as a leading scholar of the work of the Frankfurt School, especially the cultural criticism of T. W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Her book, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (MIT Press, 1989), examines the unpublished notes and observations generated by Benjamin during the later part of his life on the experience of urban modernity and consumer culture in the nineteenth century. Buck-Morss's recent essays—including "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered"; "The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe"; and "Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display"<sup>1</sup>—have set out a provocative new interpretation of the status of the aesthetic within contemporary culture. Buck-Morss has returned to the term's early definition to rethink the aesthetic in relationship to somatic or bodily knowledge under the impact of modernity. In response to a recent *October* questionnaire on "visual culture," she writes of the "liquidation of art as we have known it" under the proliferation of techniques of reproduction, and calls for a new critical analysis of the "image as a social object" in which theory itself becomes a visual practice.<sup>2</sup> The following interview took place through a series of telephone conversations and e-mail exchanges during July 1996. In it Buck-Morss discusses her recent work on the aesthetic and its significance for art making.

**Grant Kester:** Over the past several years there has been a growing interest in the art world in reclaiming "beauty" and visual pleasure as "moral and political" concepts, in part because they are understood to resist analytic reduction and to provide access to what one critic describes as "bodily responses" that derive from "out of awareness."<sup>3</sup> Although it is not always clearly enunciated, these works depend on an evaluative framework derived from early modern aesthetic philosophy that defines beauty in terms of the relationship between the individual subject (identified

by personal "taste") and the concept of an ideal society, united by a common language (e.g., Kant's *Gemeinsinn* or Shaftesbury's *sensus communis*). When considered in light of this tradition, the question of beauty hinges on attributing a transcendent status to modes of experience that are based on historically contingent modes of cultural and political domination (based on class, race, gender, and so on). Your writing on the visual and on aesthetics seems to be particularly conscious of this tradition, yet you are also working to reclaim or refashion the concept of the aesthetic. Could you talk a bit about the importance of the aesthetic, beauty, and visual pleasure in your own research?

**Susan Buck-Morss:** I take seriously Walter Benjamin's thesis in the "Artwork" essay on the liquidation of art.<sup>4</sup> He is quite insistent that art as we know it is coming to an end—although there are many readers of the essay (including, regularly, my students) who refuse to see what he is saying. It is not just a question of the loss of "aura" of the artwork. Benjamin is arguing that by the mid-twentieth century making art in the bourgeois sense is no longer tenable. Bourgeois art has always been a commodity, bought and sold on the market, so the commodification of art is not the point. His argument is, rather, that the technological conditions of production have so thoroughly blurred the boundary between "art" and cultural objects generally that its special, separate status cannot be maintained. Engineering has challenged the special status of architecture, journalism that of literature, photography that of painting, cinema that of theater—and he is optimistic about these developments. They led him to affirm the potential of mass culture, its ability to democratize not only access to culture, but cultural production itself.

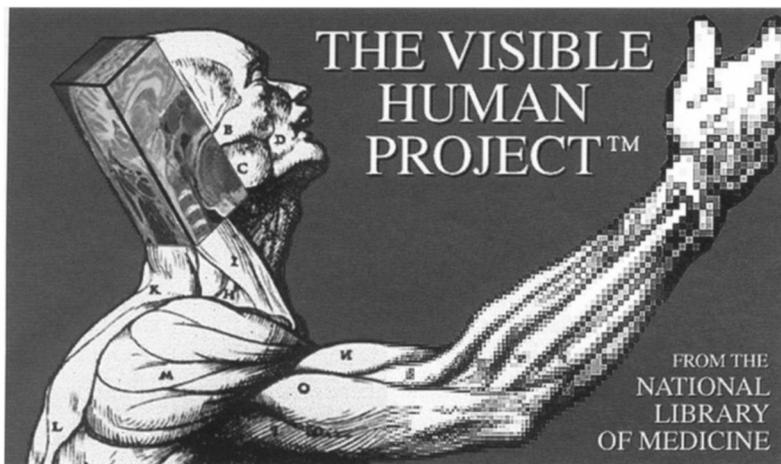
I think that museums today are conserving not only art objects, but the art idea—past its time, so to speak. Museums set themselves against the commercialization of culture, but is the logic of the value of art any different? Given what a Van Gogh is selling for on the world market, given the fact that this market is motivated as much by the relative value between the dollar and the yen, say, than any

intrinsic worth of the canvas, is this a meaningful distinction? Benjamin's observations were based on the mass culture forms of his time—the sheer quantity of their reproduction. Today it is less a question of technological reproduction and more one of technological mediation. The medium *is* the message. I am not suggesting technological determinism here, any more than was Benjamin. Content matters. But the political implications of that content depend on its transmission and reception. Radio is a good example. In the 1930s, from Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats" to Adolf Hitler's haranguing speeches, the structure of radio was propagandistic—a one-way street of influence from the center of power outward. But today radio, as well as the music that plays on it, is tremendously flexible in creating local—and not so local—networks of cultural exchange. You can actually track the movement of a recording produced, say, in West Africa, that moves to the Caribbean, then to the U.S. West Coast, or to urban centers in Europe. I mention radio because it is not a new technology. Computer networks, of course, can work the same way. But they can also function in as authoritarian a fashion as radio did in the thirties. So again, it is not a question of technological determinism.

But I am a long way from your point, about beauty returning as the criterion for "art"—not only in a formal sense, but in a political sense. Well, there is something to this, but perhaps not in the way some current critics intend it. I certainly do not feel that a complete rejection of "beauty" is in itself politically progressive, although there are artists working today who seem to think so. I'm referring to some of the conceptual art of the 1980s that was so heavy on message and so dismissive of the pleasure of sensual experience. Or today's movement of "object" art. Some of it is visually powerful. I like Cindy Sherman's work, for example, even its more gory moments. But the Piss and Shit School, if I may call it that, seems to me to be putting a lot of misplaced hope in the political effectiveness of infantile regression. The rebellion of a two year old is no match for global power.

One thing about "beauty" is that as a criterion it doesn't limit itself to art. Nature counts. So do commodities. Of course you're right to ask, beautiful by whose definition? But if we are not going to end up again in the cul-de-sac of identity politics, that criticism is insufficient. It is not because I am white, or a woman, or conditioned by mass-media images that I find something beautiful, but because, given those contextualizing identities—as well as my very ambivalent, overdetermined reaction to them—something affects me from outside myself. My senses are affected. This is aesthetic experience. Kant, as you know, described it as disinterested interest. But perhaps today, if the bourgeois art object no longer needs to be the litmus test for the experience of beauty, that distinction needs modification. Kant was referring to the fact that the desire "art" awakens in us has no agenda, no instrumental goal. We are content simply to contemplate beauty for its own sake, not for a self-interested purpose. Perhaps today we could say that beauty is the experience of material reality as something that resists instrumentalization. It doesn't matter whether that material reality calls itself art or not. It could be the experience of any cultural object—or a person, or an aspect of nature. Perhaps it inspires love rather than disinterest, passion rather than contemplation—or am I getting too enthusiastic?

You ask why the aesthetic is important for me today and what is at stake in its definition. That takes us back centrally to the question of politics. The aesthetic to me is a fundamentally cognitive experience. It is how the body senses reality, and I mean this in a rather animalistic, even biological sense. I know it is absolutely improper to say so, but this bodily experience is *not* always, already culturally mediated. To say so flies in the face of all received wisdom in the academy today, but I cannot deny my own experience. Ever since I can remember, my critical sense was nourished by bodily sensations—tense muscles, clammy feet, shoes too tight, breath too tight, holding back wanting to laugh—or to scream. Not feeling good in my skin was my way of criticizing the definition my culture was giving to



**FIG. 1** Logo from the National Library of Medicine's Visible Human Project ftp site.

the situation. Cultural meanings are sensed bodily as being wrong. Just plain wrong. How else are people capable of social protest? If we were in fact always, already produced by our respective cultures, how could it ever come into our mind to resist them? This is Adorno's point when he speaks of the somatic solidarity we feel with victims of socially organized violence, even when that violence is justified in our own culture's terms. So I want to say that aesthetics is the body's form of critical cognition, and that this sensory knowledge can and should be trusted politically. It is empathy rather than sympathy, because it is capable of producing solidarity with those who are not part of our own group, who do not share our collective identity. Or, it exposes "reason" as power's way of defending its own perpetuation. When you speak about aesthetic works as operating on some kind of presymbolic level, that is what I have in mind. But it isn't exactly "prepolitical." The problem is that a great deal of what passes for "aesthetic" experience veils material reality rather than opening it up for our critical perception.

**GK:** This relates to the question of how one might differentiate the epistemological claims of a work of "art" from the broader concept of the aesthetic that you are employing. An interesting case study in this respect is the National Institute of Health's Visible Human Project [VHP]. The VHP is a National Library of Medicine program to construct a complete graphic record of the male and female human body, a kind of *Gray's Anatomy* for the digital age. In order to assemble this record they took the body of an executed murderer named Joseph Paul Jernigan, froze it, and then cut it into 1,871 slices with a laser scalpel. Each slice was then scanned and entered into a graphics program to produce a virtual tour of the inside of the human body. Segments of the project have been on the NIH's web site for some time now, and they are also selling a CD-ROM version. What I found particularly interesting was the response to this project in the art and design communities. One writer in *I.D.* [*International Design Magazine*] waxes

philosophical about the VHP ("... a mesmerizing beauty and realism. . . . Death never looked this good"), describing the interior of Jernigan's skull as "a quiet cathedral whose congregation and clergy have been removed, although the sacred remains."<sup>5</sup> This epitomizes for me the instrumentality of the aesthetic itself, which requires that we replicate Jernigan's execution by abstracting the image of his body from the conditions of his life. When we see his cadaver we are not meant to ask questions about who he was, how he came to die, and what it means for the state to take a man's life. Rather, his death as an empirical and specific subject was the precondition for his elevation to the status of an aesthetic event that will place us in touch with the universal questions of man's spiritual identity. The aesthetic demands a kind of amnesia of the object; we must forget where it came from. Rather than an open-ended account of visual pleasure or beauty, this seems to me a very constricting one. I think I have a similar feeling about some of the questions that are raised about ostensibly didactic art of the eighties and early nineties, which reduce the discussion of the aesthetic to a simple mind/body, analysis/pleasure opposition. This response underestimates the extent to which many of the "bad" text-heavy works of the eighties provided their own forms of pleasure (if we can retrospectively treat the posters of revolutionary USSR as "beautiful" works of art, why can't we find beauty, or at least visual pleasure, in the work of Barbara Kruger, for example). And second, it underestimates the extent to which more recent works are capable of being quite didactic themselves. The characteristics of didacticism or ambiguity are not simply "in" the formal composition of the work. They are also produced in our reading of the work through the discursive positioning of it by critics, galleries, artists' statements, etc. I find some works that ostensibly embrace complexity and visual pleasure to be reductive and didactic precisely because they ask me to forcefully suppress particular cultural or political associations that I might have with a given image or material in

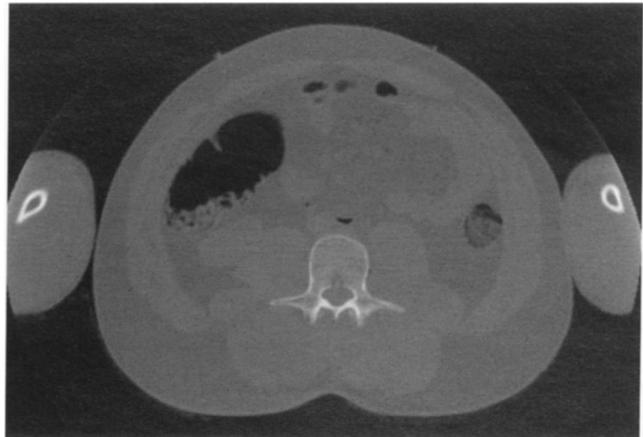
order to achieve the properly “ambiguous” (i.e., nonreferential) response.

**SB-M:** One could make an interesting comparison between critical interpretations of the images of Jernigan’s body and those of the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. In the case of Jernigan, it seems that the writer you cite wants to say that the fact that the human corpse is a social object—above all, the fact that it was produced by a state execution—is subservient to its beauty as art, when cut into hundreds of cross-sectional images. That creates a hierarchy of categories of social objects, with art at the apex. Mapplethorpe, on the other hand, troubles the boundaries between social objects, precisely by subjecting them to uniformities of aesthetic style (formalism, abstraction), and the result is that it becomes impossible for the viewer to feel secure that what s/he is looking at *is* art. Art, pornography, advertising image, fashion photography, celebrity portraits—all of these category differences are shaken in his work. They are not held apart visibly, and in this sense they are an accurate representation of the truth of these social objects. Barbara Kruger takes the same principle (the troubling of the boundaries between art-image, ad-image, porn-image) and uses it to make powerful political statements. I love her work. And I agree with you, her work has beauty. But this element of beauty heightens the political impact of the images, rather than being a substitute for it.

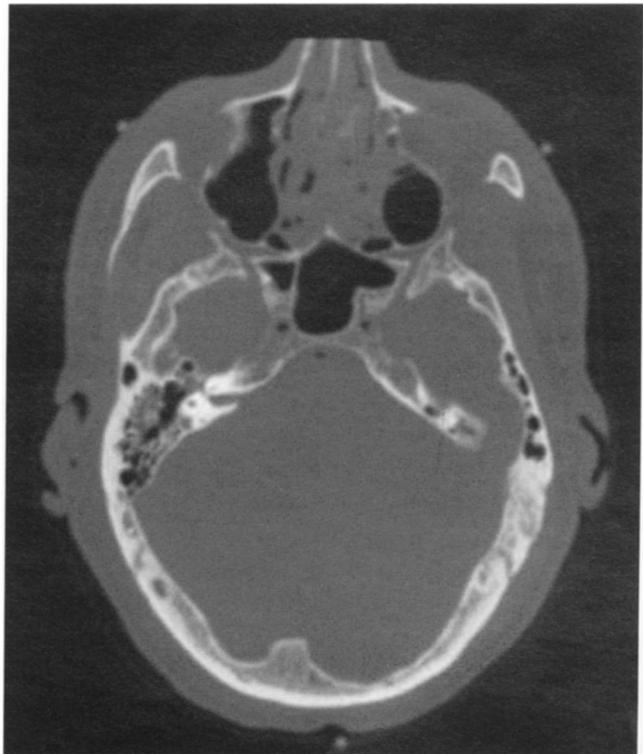
Of course, the persistent claim of newness is itself nothing new. Modernity is defined by it. But so much of what calls itself postmodern revels in a political cynicism that the modernists didn’t share. That is a huge difference. Remember when Christopher Jencks wrote about the “founding moment” of postmodernity, the dynamiting of a high-rise housing project built in the modernist, utopian spirit, but that was, according to Jencks, a failure? Of course, he is right that these massive projects didn’t produce the social utopia they were supposed to. But is it the fault of the poured concrete or the white interior wall or the number of floors? That’s blaming architecture for the fail-



**FIG. 2** Cross-section of male cadaver from the National Library of Medicine’s Visible Human Project ftp site.



**FIG. 3** Cross-section of male cadaver from the National Library of Medicine’s Visible Human Project ftp site.



**FIG. 4** Cross-section of male skull from the National Library of Medicine’s Visible Human Project ftp site.



**FIG. 5** Sport utility vehicles, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, photograph by Grant Kester, 1996.

ure of a social system in which poverty is endemic. Recently I was asked, “Don’t you think that modernity is a white, male thing?” Besides the fact that I happen to like white walls and lots of glass, I thought it was a remarkable question. Considering that the era of modernity (say, 1860 to the present) gave us the end of slavery, the enfranchisement of women, the possibility for women and people of color to get a decent job, etc.—I just can’t agree.

**GK:** It is not the existence of somatic knowledge (or of the experience of visual pleasure or beauty) that I would question, but the way in which this physiological fact is socially produced. I think that your approach to the aesthetic is important precisely because it acknowledges the social conditions that differentially construct the possibilities or horizons of somatic experience in the first place. Thus, it is not just a “universal” body having a universal aesthetic experience (à la Clive Bell or Roger Fry) that is at stake in your writings, but the body within the socially specific space of the late capitalist city.

**SB-M:** Of course, that is true, but the differences are not absolute. Take class differences, for example. On the dreamworld side, the phantasmagorias of theme parks or world’s fairs, shopping malls or publicity images, are meant to be accessible to the masses and not just the wealthy. On the side of catastrophe, the experience of shock is not limited to the worker in the factory. City streets and six-lane highways at rush hour are good examples of catastrophic shock. Transportation accidents are another. I mean, whether you are sitting in tourist class drinking a beer or up in front of the plane sipping free champagne, the shock of an explosion or mechanical failure is pretty much the same, isn’t it? And there are shocks peculiar to the upper classes, like a stock-market crash. . . .

**GK:** This leads me to a second question: do we have to accept a choice between a cognitive mastery that assimilates all forms of difference into a unitary self (I’m thinking here of Adorno’s comment about “predatory reason” as the “belly turned mind”)<sup>6</sup> or the hapless, overloaded subject of Benjamin’s phantasmagoria? Each of these modes of experience

is in a way privatized. In his essay “Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin writes about Proust:

*. . . it is a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience. It is by no means inevitable to be dependent on chance in this matter. Man’s inner concerns do not have their issueless private character by nature. They do so only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience.*<sup>7</sup>

I take Benjamin here to be suggesting that the effect of modern culture, the phantasmagoria, is to break the links between self-knowledge and social knowledge. It has the effect of “paralyzing the [social] imagination” of the viewer.<sup>8</sup> In opposition to a conventional concept of the aesthetic based on the cognitive mastery of “others,” perhaps Benjamin is suggesting a dialogical construction of self via social exchange. Here is where your work again provides an important new dimension on the aesthetic because it holds out the idea of the collective not as a utopian ideal but as a potentially realizable goal. Benjamin challenges the traditional concept of the aesthetic by suggesting that the utopia of a “common sense” that is constantly deferred by the aesthetic can be realized through a social and political transformation.<sup>9</sup> This relates of course to your discussion (in the “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics” essay) of Benjamin’s comment on the “aestheticization of politics” and the way in which Fascism offers false “symbolic” resolutions (such as a fictive mass identity) to real social conflicts.<sup>10</sup> I would argue, and I think I am simply agreeing with you here, that the capacity for aesthetic experience is common to all, but that the ability we have to regulate that experience (who can afford to buy a sport utility vehicle and be “above it all”?) is social.

**SB-M:** What I am saying is that even if there is not a universal common sense of “beauty,” all cognition has, necessarily, a sensory or “aesthetic” component—and this is precisely the component upon which the power of criticism

rests. The critical power of art, or any cultural form, may not be perceived universally, but if it *is* perceived, it hits you in the gut. Now this somatic experience resists predatory reason, precisely because it can't be stomached, gobbled up by the mind. If experience leaves a nondigestible residue that won't go away, that is food for critical cognition. But again, why is "art" privileged as the object of such experience? I really don't know what the word means any more. Aesthetics, however, seems to me more important than ever. "Aesthetics after art," you might call it.

**GK:** Could you talk a bit about what an "aesthetics after art" might consist of? Does this refer to the idea of a cultural practice that engages not with autonomous or exemplary instances of high art, but with culture in general? Do we give up anything worthwhile in abandoning the distinction between "art" and "culture"? What kind of knowledge would an "aesthetics after art" produce? Would it have disciplinary boundaries?

**SB-M:** I mean that if aesthetics were freed from "art" as its object, it could come into its own as a form of cognition—not a discipline, not just another way of doing "cultural studies," but as a self-reflective, cognitive practice. Aesthetics would become anthropology in the philosophical sense, and a rather brutally materialist one at that. It would mean, first, getting back to the original meaning of the term *asthítikos*, "perceptive by feeling." I am in no way advocating a new romanticism—not romantic feeling, but something more like sniffing danger. That is an example of somatic cognition at its critical best. In a certain sense this is a return to naïve empiricism, but of course there is no going back. If the conception of "aesthetics" here is pre-Kantian and pre-Hegelian, it does not mean that, as philosophical anthropology, it is precritical. And it takes history into account, understanding that somatic experience itself has changed, given the prostheses of machines and now of electronic media. On that account alone, eighteenth-century empiricism is not an adequate description of bodily cognition today.

Of course, you will protest that there is no possibility

of a philosophical anthropology—bodies are too different, sexually, ethnically, class-wise. I would not disagree that differences matter in certain contexts. But if the question is one of sniffing danger, these differences are not crucial. If a house is burning, you yell, "everybody out!" Now, even if some people are arguing that (in certain cultures) women can tolerate more physical pain than men, it would be absurd to suggest that they stay in the burning building. You yell "*everybody* out," and you mean it. You don't go over a checklist of "difference" before you scream your head off. The body as a *cognitive* organ can, at least given the same physical environment, be described with a fair amount of universalism. This is true of the brain as well, which I like to think of as a body part, and not as some decorporealized *Seele* or *Geist*.

We need a little vulgar empiricism—*Plumpes Denken*, as Brecht used to call it! And "aesthetics" becomes crucial in this context. It would mean ending the privileging of written language over, say, the mimetic languages of facial expression and bodily gestures, the languages of images. And text, too, can be seen as a material object. I have seen some fascinating computer representations of texts in three-dimensional space, where you actually can enter particular texts—in this case it was two manifestoes, one by the historian and critic Donna Harroway and one by Karl Marx—and feel your way around the words, all the way around. You can make the "I" so big you can circle it like a dog circling a tree. Encountering the "I" like this is a remarkable philosophical experience. And it is a properly "aesthetic" one.

In the context of a changed notion of aesthetics the work of "artists" also changes. Rather than creating "art," the goal would be to provide in their representations, of whatever kind, a somatic experience that is self-reflexive—critical, in the philosophical sense. Mapplethorpe does this in his troubling of boundaries between art, advertising, and pornography. We just can't take in his whole opus under any of art history's conventions—except the purely formalist one which, given the fact that one is looking at a



**FIG. 6** Robert Mapplethorpe, *X Portfolio, Helmut and Brooks N.Y.C.*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 13½ × 13½ inches. © 1978 Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe.

fist thrust up an anus, is just not all there is to the experience of the image. You keep wondering what it *feels* like (for the fistor and the fisteer). And then you come upon a remarkable revelation. You realize that through the very core of the human body, from one end to the other there is a hole. The center of the human being is a conduit for the outside world. That's remarkable. It is also a statement of universal anthropology—gay and straight, male and female, black and white. How the hole *feels* to people, of course, varies.

I have read Kobena Mercer's series of transmuting commentaries on Mapplethorpe's photographs of black, gay, male nudes. Now, what Mapplethorpe gives his viewer is an experience of those bodies, and as Mercer admits in the second version of his criticism, it is an undeniably erotic experience. The individual viewer is left to think through his or her very individual reaction, not merely to the black male nude body, but to experiencing that body as erotic—whatever sexual or racial identity the individual professes. So the cognitive direction shifts to the viewer, who has to come to terms with the erotic feelings she or he has, and this is a properly aesthetic experience in my view.

We could take another example, Mapplethorpe's famous photograph of himself with a whip up his ass, as he bends his head back to look in a mirror and take the shot (and to look at us looking up his ass). If we take seriously the fact that this is a self-portrait of a photographer, we realize that he has given us not just a wildly scandalous image, but a new metaphor: the camera, no longer as the eye, but as anus. Ever since the 1920s and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, it is the eye that has been the model for the camera. It implies the visual promiscuity and pleasure of the camera. But the anus is an aperture of control. Today, in our overwhelmingly visual culture, the camera is just that, an instrument of control—not only in terms of surveillance, but also in terms of social recognition. The people who count in society are the people whose images you recognize. And the photographer knows that—Mapplethorpe certainly knew it.

**GK:** Could you talk a bit about your response to what might be called the psychoanalytic critique of the aesthetic? This tends to revolve around the argument that the aesthetic relies on an Enlightenment concept of the subject as (actually or potentially) whole, integrated, and perfectible. A

similar critique emerges from Foucault's work. The belief that modernity has fragmented human nature (e.g., Schiller and "aesthetic education") assumes the existence of some organic or whole form to which we can return, and from which we have been separated.

**SB-M:** Crucially significant for any contemporary philosophical anthropology is Freud's conception of *Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action. It is a causality that works backward in time, and it is a remarkable scientific discovery. For this reason, no human unhappiness is reducible to childhood experience. Every original trauma must find a present experience for its continued expression. At the same time, repetition is never merely repetition. There is always something new in the experience as well—which is why it is possible to be healed of a trauma. But healed doesn't mean whole. It just means capable of responding to the present possibilities for happiness. And that is not too much to ask of life, or of the social relations that structure it. —

#### Notes

1. In *October* 62 (Fall 1992): 3–41; *October* 73 (Summer 1995): 3–26; and *Visual Display: Culture beyond Appearances*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Peter Wollen (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 111–41.
2. "Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 29.
3. Mark Van Proyen, "A Conversation with Dave Hickey, Critic," *Artweek* 27, no. 4 (April 1996): 14. Hickey states: "I am interested in beauty at its most radical. I am interested in images like Robert Mapplethorpe's or Hannah Wilke's—images in which the cultural signification of the content and the social signification of the presentation are so violently at odds with one another that you have to make some moral decisions—that your relationship to the work is moral and political in a literal, physical sense." See also Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993); Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and "'B' Is for Beauty," special issue of *New Art Examiner* 21, no. 8 (April 1994).
4. Walter Benjamin, "The Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–52.
5. John Hockenberry, "Corpus Delecti," *I.D. Magazine*, March/April 1996, 45.
6. Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 22–23.
7. Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1985), 112.
8. Ibid.
9. See Richard B. Wolff, *An Old-Spelling, Critical Edition of Shaftesbury's Letter Concerning Enthusiasm and Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor* (New York: Garland, 1988).
10. Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Fall 1992): 3–4.

GRANT H. KESTER is guest editor of this issue of *Art Journal*.