

general social technique, and of use-values external to the realm of art? [...]

The production of value in modern art is inconceivable without the idea of the critique and the reworking of notions of skill and technical competence. The very interrelationship between artistic technique and general social technique is predicated upon this. Indeed, it is on the basis of this relationship that the complex labours of art – its 'intangibilities of form' – have been constituted and reconstituted during the twentieth century.

It is the readymade, above all else, that is key to understanding the development of the modern conditions of reproducibility in art and art's relationship to general social technique. With the readymade we are, at once, in the realm of artistic labour and productive labour, art's autonomy and post-autonomy, novelty and the copy.

- 1 Raoul Hausmann, quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965) 118.
- 2 [footnote 3 in source] This also works in the opposite direction. The dispersal of 'artistic technique' across disciplinary boundaries has clearly been appropriated as a model of 'good practice' and 'open' management in some of the creative and new services industries. [...]
- 3 [4] Tracey Emin's career is a perfect example of this: from neo-Conceptual marginalia to designer of smart bags for the luxury luggage maker Longchamp.
- 4 [8] See Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities ... or The End of the Social* (1982), trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1985).
- 5 [9] See Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1980), trans. Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).
- 6 [10] Genetic engineering instates this process clearly. Cloning – Cell Nuclear Replacement – is the infinite reproduction of the same as the 'new'. That is, cloning is not the *exact* reproduction of the prototype in physiology or consciousness (just as twins born within seconds of each other are not exactly identical). The genome may be reproducible but the behaviour and individual characteristics of human beings are not. [...]
- 7 [11] Where it has, it has borrowed its models from the biological, neurological and other physical sciences. One such model is the neurocomputational account of consciousness in the new neurobiology. [...]

John Roberts, extracts from 'Replicants and Cartesians', *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London and New York: Verso, 2007) 8–20 [footnotes abbreviated].

Mark Cousins The Ugly//1994

[...] Since antiquity, beauty has been regarded as possessing a privileged relation to truth. From this it follows that an ugly representation, or an ugly object, is a negation not just of beauty, but of truth. The category of beauty plays an epistemological role; it presents the truth of an object. Ugliness belongs to whatever negates that truth. It belongs to a series of categories which similarly distort the truth of objects. It belongs to what is contingent, for contingency cannot admit of the truth of objects. It belongs to what is individual, for individuality does not express the truth of objects. It belongs to the hell of error; it can never accede to the haven of what is ideal and what is necessary. This philosophical drama, in which the forces of truth and of error wage war over the territory of art, determines the character of ugliness. Ugliness is condemned to the role of the mistake, to the role of the object that has gone wrong. [...]

Ugliness, contingency, individuality are all terms which belong to the pole of negation. As a consequence, it follows that ugliness will be thought of from the point of view of beauty. At a logical level, ugliness is the negation of beauty; at the level of perception, ugliness is the opposite of beauty. All speculation about ugliness travels through the idea of what it is not. This is indeed characteristic of philosophy's attempt to postpone or prevent any encounter with ugliness as such. Ugliness is always shadowed by the beautiful. The argument that will be presented here is part of an attempt to suggest that ugliness has little to do with beauty and that, in fact, beauty and ugliness belong to quite different registers.

What we might call the philosophical account of ugliness was already laid down in antiquity. For Aristotle, the beautiful object is one which has the ideal structure of an object; it has the form of a totality. [...] Internally it exhibits coherence; externally it establishes a sharp boundary between itself and the world. This establishes a relation between perfection and the idea of the beautiful object. In this case, perfection does not mean, as it does to us, the zenith of beauty. The perfect object is, rather, one which is finished, completed. Any addition or subtraction from the object would ruin its form. [...]

This stress upon the object's being perfect and therefore finished already suggests a philosophical criterion as to what will function as ugly. It is that which prevents a work's completion, or deforms a totality – whatever resists the whole. An ugly attribute of a work is one that is excessively individual. It is not just that monsters and characters from low life belong to a class of objects which are deemed ugly; it is that they are too strongly individual, are too much

themselves. As such, they resist the subordination of the elements of the object to the ideal configuration of a totality. The ugly object belongs to a world of ineluctable individuality, contingency and resistance to the ideal. [...]

Ugliness can deform a work, but it can also strengthen it. For the stronger the totality of a work of art, the more it has had to overcome those elements within itself that oppose its unification. Indeed, if this is true, a new doubt about a certain type of beauty arises. If the structure of a beautiful object has been too little tested by whatever opposes that structure, then it is facile, 'merely' beautiful.

Ugliness, by complicating beauty, achieves an ambiguous status – utterly excluded from beauty, and at the same time a 'moment' in the unfolding of a beauty whose form as a totality is all the more triumphant for having overcome the resistance to itself in its 'moments' of ugliness.

The discourse of aesthetics, especially in Kant's third *Critique*, fundamentally complicates and radically skews this relation, but does not reverse it. Commentators have frequently identified the category of the sublime as one which overthrows the limits of the classical conception of beauty. [...]

The sublime is neither an image nor an object of a particular type, but the enactment of a scene in which the subject and object have a dynamic relation to each other within a specific setting. The awfulness of the object does not immediately threaten the subject, but rather – given the subject's safety-in-danger – it awakens in the subject an apprehension that his potential scope, even his scale, is greater than the vast and fearful object. [...] Indeed, there seems to be something almost inescapably cinematic about Kant's description of the site of the sublime. I sit (safely) confronting such arresting, awful, fearful representations.' As long as the gap between the subject and the object constitutes a margin of safety, as long as the subject does not cross that fateful boundary between the fearful and fear, the relation of the sublime can be maintained. If it is crossed, if the subject goes too far or the object comes too close, the sublime will collapse. The paradox of the sublime – or rather its inherent ratio – is that the closer I am to the boundary, the more intense is my experience of the sublime. The moment of its zenith is also the moment of its collapse.

But the vastness of the object, its indistinctness, its lack of proportion or symmetry, does not necessarily signal a revolution in the relation between beauty and ugliness has occurred. For, if the totality of the object seems to be absent in all these sublime representations of the world with its unfinished and unlimited character, this does not mean that the sublime abandons the category of the totality. Here, totality is an attribute, not of the object but of the subject, and of the subject's relation to the object. The attributes of symmetry and proportion, which now may seem to be lacking in the object, none the less reappear as a symmetry and proportionality *between* the subject and the object. [...]

We can now move to a hypothesis concerning ugliness: *Aesthetics cannot deal with ugliness, save as a negation and as a moment of beauty.* Aesthetics is the theoretical knowledge of beauty and the subject's relation to beauty, and it therefore follows that there cannot be an aesthetics of ugliness. It also follows that the experience of ugliness is not an aesthetic experience as such. Kant's notion of aesthetic experience and of judgement cannot admit propositions such as 'This is ugly'. The judgement 'This is beautiful' does not have an opposite. The failure to form a judgement of beauty is just that; it is not an assertion of ugliness. If ugliness is to become an object of inquiry, this inquiry will have to be conducted outside the scope of aesthetics. But like aesthetics it cannot afford to collapse into the relativism of taste. For, if the investigation of the ugly is reduced to the question of what is held, here and now, or there and then, to be ugly, there is nothing to say, beyond the fact that some people say one thing, some another. The sociological and historical investigation of personal preferences, or the cultural machinery of taste, can never accede to the problem of beauty and ugliness. For that problem is not about the variability of taste, but about a certain modality of subjectivity in relation to the object.²

We have argued that beauty and ugliness operate in different registers, but this much they do have in common: they cannot be accounted for in terms of the way in which a culture imposes a scale and a hierarchy of preferences. The problems of beauty and of ugliness both exceed, though differently, the way in which cultures use the terms. Like beauty, ugliness entails a certain relation of a subject to an object; nor can ugliness be reduced to a set of attributes which are assigned to it. It exists, decisively and fundamentally, within the relation. But what is this relation?

The next hypothesis is as follows: *The ugly object is an object which is experienced both as being there and as something that should not be there.* That is, *the ugly object is an object which is in the wrong place.* It is important to detach this definition of ugliness as far as possible from aesthetics, for it is not at all a question that an object, having been judged to be ugly, is experienced as something which should not be there. This is not a theory of propriety. It is, rather, that the experience of the object as something which should not be there is primary and constitutive of the experience of ugliness. At this level such an experience is identical to the idea of its being in the wrong place. This does not mean that there is a right place for the ugly object; there is no such place. For this is not a relation of incongruity or impropriety; the 'wrong place' is an absolute. But in what respect is the ugly object an object which is in the wrong place? Briefly, from the position of the subject to whom the object discloses itself as ugly.

But where may we look for help in thinking out the issue of something which is out of place? Undoubtedly the strongest thoughts about what is 'out of place'

come from religious taboos and from the clinical analysis of obsessional neurosis. Both sources (if indeed they are not the same source) betray an underlying concern with things being in their place, and the opposite of this, which is *dirt*. Mary Douglas has famously remarked that dirt is matter out of place. What makes dirt dirty is not its substantial form, however much we commonly believe this to be the case, but the fact that it is in the wrong place. In Judaism the earliest ideas concerning sin were expressed, not as abstract issues of ethics, but as the material problem of the *stain*. And it is the stain which leads that early notion of sin to imagine its expiation in terms of purification rather than restitution. A stain must be cleansed.³ Is this because the stain is ugly? The stain is not an aesthetic issue as such. It is a question of something that should not be there and so must be removed. The constitutive experience is therefore of an object which should not be there; in this way it is a question of ugliness. This connection between a thing being in the wrong place, sin and ugliness still obtains where the prohibitions within a culture take the form, not of elaborate reasoning, but of swift revulsion from the 'ugliness' of an act. An economy of dirt is therefore one way of opening up the question of ugliness.

This economy can also be translated into spatial terms. In so far as dirt is matter out of place it must have passed a boundary, limit or threshold into a space where it should not be. The dirt is an ugly deduction from 'good' space, not simply by virtue of occupying the space, but by threatening to contaminate all the good space around it. In this light, 'dirt', the ugly object, has a spatial power quite lacking in the beautiful object. One way of clarifying the difference between the registers of beauty and ugliness is to translate them into topological entities. Broadly speaking, the beautiful object remains the same size as itself, while the ugly object becomes much larger than it is. There is an important reason for this. All objects exist twice, both as themselves and as representations of themselves. But I have a vested interest in pretending to myself that this is not so, for if I were forced to recognize this I would have to conclude that my own existence – as myself and as my representation of myself – are different, and in certain conditions might even come apart. It is not just an idealization of the human body which is implied in the Vitruvian scheme of proportion; it is a manic insistence that an even more fundamental proportion in man is guaranteed: that he takes up only as much space as his form displaces. This phantasy depends upon a conviction about isomorphism, about the relation between objects and space. Firstly, that there will be an isomorphic relation between an object and the space it occupies. Secondly, that there will be an isomorphic relation between the outside of an object (representation) and its inside (existence). Thirdly, that this is most true when the object is a human being. For the thought of an inside being larger than its outside is one which repels human beings.

But how different is the space of the ugly object, and how little Archimedes understood of it. Contamination, at a logical level, is the process whereby the inside of an object demonstrates that it is larger than its outside or representation. This is one reason why it is important for architecture to be able to think the ugly object. It is also the topographical reason why the ugly object as dirt is not merely a question of 'where the object shouldn't be'. It is not just that the ugly object has trespassed into a zone of purity, for the ugly object is voracious and, through contamination, will consume the entire zone. This demonstrates that an important aspect of the ugly object is its relation to space – including, as we shall see, the space of the subject.

No one knows this better than the obsessional neurotic. Leaving aside the question of cleansing as a form of assuaging guilt, it is clear that for the obsessional the answer to the question 'Where should the object *not* be?' is 'Close to me'. It is not just that the obsessional wants to keep ugly objects as far away as possible; it is, rather, that they become ugly by getting closer. Underlying this is the conviction that what is at a distance is under control, and what is closer is out of control. The obsessional thinks in terms of the formula that ugliness is a function of proximity, but also thinks that the way to stop an object getting closer, to bring it under control, is to clean it. This involves a phantasy about gleaming surfaces; whatever gleams is sufficiently distant from myself. What I polish recedes; what is dirty approaches. But the hopelessness of the task of cleaning is all too apparent. The more you clean something, the dirtier it gets. As the surface is cleaned it reveals those fewer but more stubborn stains which demonstrate even more starkly how the remaining stains consume the surrounding space. The case of the obsessional shows that the ugly object, in its relation to the subject, is not static but is always eating up the space between it and the subject.

But what is this subject? Why is it confronted by something which is in the wrong place? In order to answer this it is necessary to remember that the 'subject' referred to here is not the 'subject' that Kant has in mind, nor the subject of philosophical discourse in general. Still less is it the 'subject' that serves as the bearer of cultural codes in the human sciences. It is, rather, the subject that responds to objects as a determinate psychical apparatus, that is, as a radical division between unconscious and conscious life – a being which is the locus of desire as well as the locus of institutions of defence against those desires.

This has immediate consequences for a psychoanalytic account of the difference between our responses to beauty and to ugliness. In so far as beauty may be taken as an object of desire, the subject is governed by the pleasure principle. But it is the nature of desire to work in respect of representations. 'Representation' here does not refer to the nature of an object, whether it be a

painting or a person: it refers, rather, to the fact that the economy of desire is intrinsically about representation. All objects of desire are representations, since they are substitutions for something that is experienced as having been lost. This economy of desire can be illustrated by reference to the infant. The infant does not experience desire as long as he is satisfied. The first gap in existence occurs with a lack of satisfaction. The infant does not exactly 'experience' this lack. Rather, experience is born of it. The infant deals with the lack of satisfaction by hallucinating what he imagines is the object that would restore satisfaction. But hallucination involves a relation to a representation; it does not produce satisfaction. The representation, in this sense, is a substitute for something which is now lost, and which constitutes the subject as a complex of lacks. The infant assumes subjectivity as the catastrophic precipitation into a world of desire (lack) and substitutions for a lost object. However much the subject strives to fulfil his desires, the economy of lack can never be satisfied. The lost object can never be found because it is no longer an object; it is the condition of desire. Caught between what is experienced as lost and the illusions of desire, the subject follows the plot of his own fiction.⁴

This economy governs both the life of phantasy and life in the world. But the world includes obstacles to desire; indeed the world itself may be thought of as an obstacle to desire. It is this which leads Freud to define 'reality' in a special sense, one which is quite alien to definitions offered by philosophers or by the human sciences. If the philosopher defines reality or existence as the sum of what there is, and if the anthropologist defines it as the sum of what there is from the standpoint of a culture, those definitions are no part of Freud's reasoning. For him reality is anything that functions as an obstacle to desire. The idea of 'reality testing' is not the cognitive adventure that psychologists imagine, but the painful blow, or wound, that is delivered to our narcissism. Reality is that which, being an obstacle, both arrests and denies us our pleasure. It is in this sense that we can consider a thesis which might otherwise seem petulant and melodramatic: *The ugly object is existence itself*, in so far as existence is the obstacle which stands in the way of desire. And so it is, from the point of view of desire, that the ugly object should not be there. Its character as an obstacle is what makes it ugly. [...]

- 1 In a section which follows the quotation above, Kant gives an unusual definition of the brave soldier: 'one whose sense of safety lasts longer than others'.
- 2 Since the late eighteenth century an argument has existed that assertions that something is beautiful or ugly are nothing more than a linguistic assertion that the subject 'likes' or 'dislikes' something. As such, aesthetics is ruled out of court, in favour of the analysis of preferences or taste. Contemporary sociology attempts to show how the mechanisms of taste serve the

interests of certain social classes and relations of cultural prestige. But these forms of argument, however appealing, fall short of Kant's problem.

- 3 There is a necessary ambivalence about the stain itself which must be cleansed, or the place of the stain. The space as a whole has been violated. Contamination is a process which by definition *spreads*. This is why both religious taboos and the obsessional are concerned with minutiae. For even the tiniest violation of a boundary always has large consequences.
- 4 This is an absurdly contracted statement of a psychoanalytic view of the birth of the subject, which is so different from the birth of the infant. It is concerned to signal that from the point of view of desire all objects are also representations. Such a condition reaches a point of intensity in the wish to see. For what is it that we wish to see, beyond what we see?

Mark Cousins, extract from 'The Ugly' (Part 1), *AA Files*, no. 28 (London: Architectural Association, 1994) 61-4.