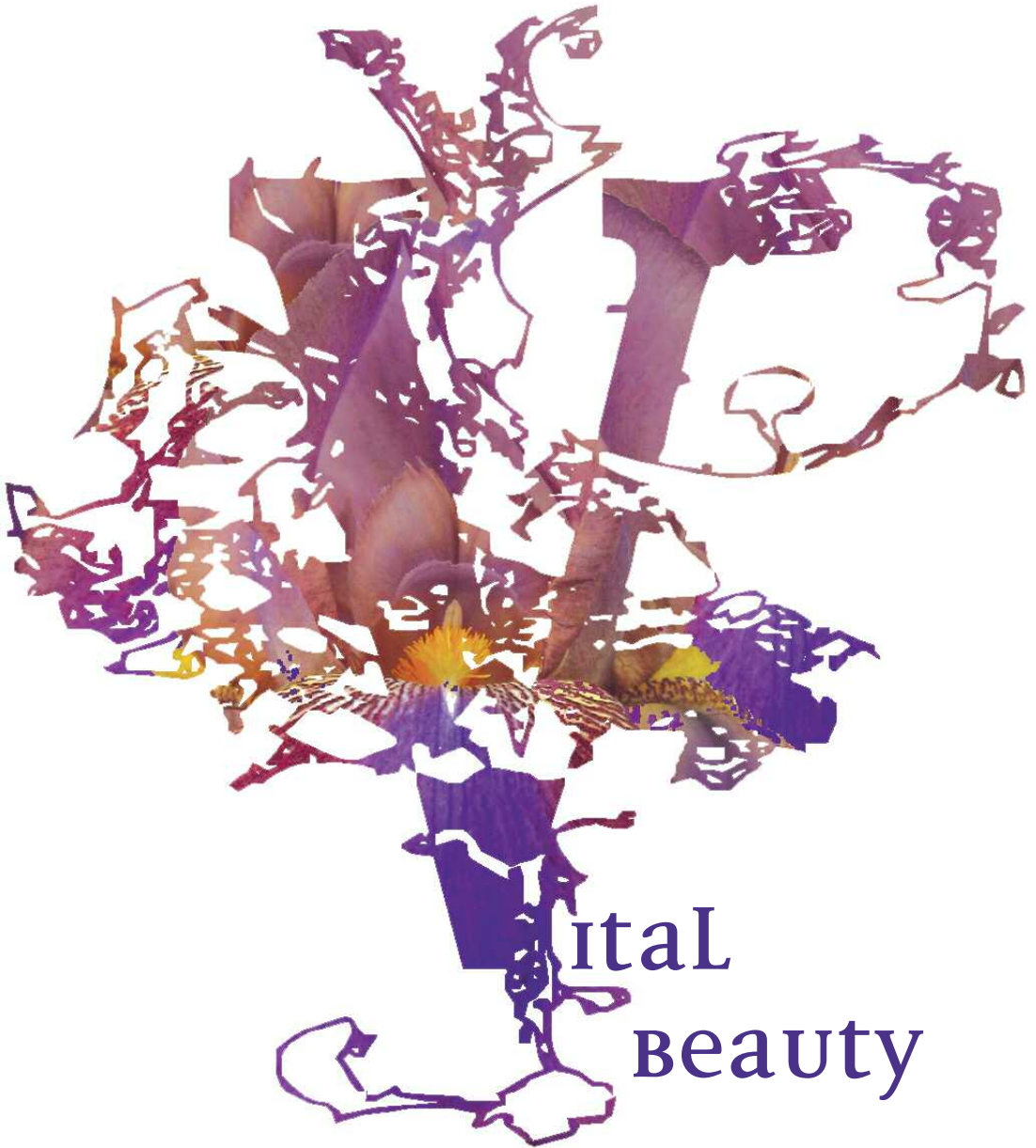


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ital

beauty

Let's take a short inventory of where we are. We are swamped in information that seems more neurotic, convoluted and irritated, more apolitical, painful and ugly than ever. Then, to that, add all the porn. And add all the images of adolescents stretched out on couches like koalas, taking part in reality TV shows. Then add the arts, where going to every Biennale feels like seeing a photo of a massive explosion a hundredth of a second after detonation. And then add the permanent crisis, the bankers in their pinstriped suits crossing empty streets devoid of angry crowds and making their way through the fragile Occupy settlements – not a pretty sight. And add the wars nobody cares about. We seem to have arrived at a time of pure exhaustion. Everything seems to have been deflated, emptied out – politics, art, economy, theory; there seems to be no exception.

One of the answers in recent decades has been to shift back gears and slow down – make your own bread, grow your own vegetables, keep your own livestock, throw out the television, talk to your neighbors. It's not a bad idea, except that you need to put an enormous wall around yourself and your friends to enjoy it. The aesthetics would become that of a vacuum, and life would have to be experienced under the same conditions. So let's not do that.

Halfway through the nineteenth century, a continuously agitated John Ruskin started to work on some answers. He devised them first in the realm of art and then in architecture, and he later effortlessly applied them to political economy. His concept of vital beauty, developed in 1846, not only involved looking for living forms of beauty, such as we find in plant life, but looking for a new experience of beauty altogether. He wanted relationships in art to become the same as those in nature, as an attunement with life and its processes. Suddenly, it was not simply a case of an active mind (in a passive body) decoding "typical" forms of beauty but one of a living-with vital forms, a sympathy – the same word we encounter in Gustav Fechner's enjoyment of plant life in the same period. For both men, encounters between things were deeply aesthetic: things were not merely seen but felt and experienced. The experience of beauty was one of bonding and friendship. And the resulting friendships and fellowships entailed enormous networks of ecology.

When we fast-forward more than a century, we find art historian Herbert Read attaching the notion of vitality in art to the depiction of animal life, especially as it occurs in paleolithic cave art. However, for Read, this vitality breaks away from what he conceives of as beauty. In his 1955 book *Icon and Idea*, Read quotes sculptor Henry Moore:

Beauty is not the aim in my sculpture ... For me a work of art must first have in it a pent-up energy, an intense life of its own, independent of the object it may represent. When a work has this powerful vitality we do not connect the word beauty with it.

Soon after Ruskin, vitality and beauty became separated and could no longer be understood as sharing the same realm. Of course, Moore meant to denounce a classical, typical beauty, one of preexisting harmonies and proportions. But Ruskin rightly saw things as being more complicated: life was not simply working away from form; on the contrary, it was continuously working towards it. But these are quite different, atypical forms. Implicitly, such life forms can never come to rest, and they therefore have to be imperfect and unfinished, saturated as they are with force and activity. Ruskin's notion of vital beauty should be positioned in between that classical, static beauty of typologies and the modernist, abstractionist loss of beauty (and its simultaneous move toward the sublime); this position allowed him to understand life as formation. Later, when he started his full-blown attacks on Victorian industrialism, as in *Unto This Last*, he did so in the same terms as he used in looking at art. And here, things took a devious turn: Ruskin simply offered a nonideological, *aesthetic critique of capitalism*. The problem was not that we were alienated from our work, our products; it was that we lacked a sense of beauty, or that our sense of beauty was frustrated and obstructed. Marx could never turn his theory into a positive philosophy; he believed things would be fine once power relations were reversed and the means of production had changed hands. For Ruskin, what was crucial was those means of production themselves. For him, beauty was not only about the appearance of our products but how they were made, of what ma-

terials, under what conditions, and for what price; in short, it was an all-out aesthetic system of values. Instead of warming up the old Marxist critique of surplus value, we might as well take a closer look at Ruskin's aesthetic doctrine of inherent value. And actually, when we look at it from that angle, we suddenly see that it deeply affects not merely art and politics but technology as well.

Similarly, in the early 1990s, the late Alfred Gell started to re-think the relationship between art and technology. For him, both were strongly related to charm and enchantment, in a reciprocity we find as far back as Daedalus, for whom intricacy meant the captivating labyrinth, sinuous decoration as well as perplexing automata. For Gell, one could not understand an artwork without considering both its animacy, the result of complex patterns highly dependent on technologies, and its agency, a relationship resulting from that animacy that could be either individual or social. Though in this volume we veer away from embracing the so-called material culture studies that reduce artistic and technological objects to their relations, we do try to walk the thin line between process and product. Of course, billions of objects are surrounded and absorbed in vast networks of exchange, but that doesn't mean the exchanges themselves have become the object and that things simply dissolve in the flows. No, it places them right at the fore, and to explain this position, we again need the Ruskins and the Fechners, because they would tell us that the life surrounding the object is aesthetically related to the life of the object itself. This seems ridiculously simple, but it is a radical conclusion when viewed from that twentieth-century perspective by which things were mere signs of things they were not.

For us, advocates of the use of digital machines and electronic interactivity in art and architecture, the concept of vital beauty does not merely imply a confirmation of what we thought anyway. On the contrary, we see now that pure exchange and activity, even when loaded with meaning, do not add up to beauty either ethically or aesthetically if that activity doesn't follow some path of convergence, if not to say some path toward form. There is no beauty without things, and there are no things without technology, and there is no technology without politics, so we might as well start working out a politics of beauty.