On Beauty Convening

Held at the Ford Foundation, curated by Helicon Collaborative
December 8, 2015

In December of 2015, as part of the Art of Change initiative, we brought together a small group of thinkers in a range of fields—psychology, economics, art, philosophy, public policy–to discuss the topic of beauty. We were starting with a contention that contemporary society has overvalued economic growth and technological innovation, equating these with progress in human development and prioritizing them at the expense of the things that in fact make life worth living—such as human connection, beauty, nature, love, and art. We know that material wealth does not lead to happiness, yet our hyper-capitalist society has made it increasingly difficult to talk about and champion the more humanistic elements of life as worthy of investment and development.

Our goal was to invite people with vastly different perspectives to discuss how we might more effectively articulate, value, and nurture beauty as a basic need and right, and why it would benefit us as a society to do so. The conversation had two parts:

- **Exploring** why beauty matters, and how beauty and justice are interdependent.
- **Expanding** the space for beauty in our societal discourse and policymaking.

We asked, in the words of Ford Foundation president Darren Walker, what it might take to build "an economy of empathy?" The convening attendees were incredibly generous with their thinking, and we share some of their statements below in response to the question of what beauty means for them and how it relates to justice. A full list of participants, agenda, and selected resources is here.

Nancy Adler, Professor of Organizational Behavior at McGill University

Thinking about a time in my life when I experienced the power of beauty ignited a cascade of memories. Memories with momentum. Let me share one, as if you too were there with me. It is 1973. It's a warm evening, a profusion of stars fill the darkening Mediterranean sky. We're in Israel, seated high above the stage in Caesarea's 2000 year old Roman amphitheater. The audience falls silent. Across the stage, walking with slow, halting steps, the evening's renowned cellist enters. At age 97, he lowers himself with difficulty onto the lone chair at center stage. Slowly he lifts his cello and raises his bow. Suddenly all signs of age vanish. Pablo Casals begins to play. The music of Bach touches my ears. It flirts with my soul; each note seemingly offered just to me. All eternity is present. There is nothing except the music. Casals plays for each of us and for the stars.

The music comes home to live within each of us as something more powerful than memories, not just for that moment, but for the rest of our lives.

Then, as if Bach had written miracles into the score, this perfect moment gets better. There is a pause. Casals invites an eight year old prodigy to join him on stage. Weaving together the generations, the 8 year old and 97 year old play together. Multiple eternities all held together by Bach and the stars.

That evening was in August 1973. Pablo Casals' life ended in October 1973. That same month, on Yom Kippur—October 6th, 1973—war erupted, destroying all vestiges of calm and beauty. A week later, the war still raging, I joined twelve people, six Palestinian and six Jews, all artists, in the home of the Palestinian fire chief of East Jerusalem. As he served us Shabbat [Sabbath] lunch and animated conversation engulfed us; not just about the urgent need to end the fighting but, more importantly, about what would bring peace. What type of artists would we, and all society, need to be to create a Middle East defined not by struggle but by beauty?

How do we invite beauty back into the world? How do we collectively hold the right conversations for global society to flourish? Maybe such conversations can only be held through the vocabulary of the arts. The dehydrated language of politics, economics, and war has not only failed to end the ugliness, but it has been unsuccessful in bringing beauty back into our relationship to the planet and to each other. The 21st-century's call to beauty is not narrowly limited to professional artists. No, the call to beauty is broad; the call is for each of us to reclaim our own power of artistic creation. We need artistic vision to co-create the world we crave, but fear has become elusive fantasy. We need artistic inspiration to create our own eternity. We need the artist's courage to let beauty define us, without any hint of war or degradation.

The very ways in which art is created within each of us can hold the conversations we most need today. Singer-songwriter Phil Ochs commands us, as global citizens, to recognize that: "In these ugly times, the only true protest is beauty." It is not coincidence that the call to beauty has arrived at exactly the time when the world so desperately needs to engage in a new conversation. As every artist knows, half-measures are never enough. Less ugly is never beautiful. Only beauty can guide us to the eternity we most want for every generations' 8 year olds and 97 year olds.

Hilton Als, Writer and Critic for New Yorker Magazine

I've always been perplexed by the idea of justice in particular, as it relates to beauty or not. I was an art history major at Columbia University and pretty much left studying, and academia, because of two things: One was that I couldn't cope with connoisseurship, which you have to take if you are going to pursue a PhD in art history; secondly, I was discouraged by a very brilliant art historian who said I would not really be able to survive in the academy—that writing was quite different than having a career as a person who

was expert at something. These two ideas forged in my head; that there was a rule for what is beautiful, and that one could be denigrated at a moment's notice. And these two conversations—one that I had with myself and one with my professor—did everything to change my life. They also sent me back to the person I had been, which was someone who grew up, along with my sisters and brother, under the social welfare system in New York at the time when social workers could come into your house unannounced and look to see if you were being supported by a man; if your mother was working extra hours; and so and so on. They became two political forces that shaped my consciousness that made me understand that the hierarchy of beauty was something that I was dead set against and that beauty, as I perceived it—which was my mother and my sisters—could be denigrated because they had no power.

So this idea of power being related to beauty has always been anathema to me and also something that I criticize quite roundly. But while that narrative is going on, I really do seek what the great poet Marianne Moore called "the strange experience of beauty," which a destabilizing force. And I believe that that destabilizing force is political as much as aesthetic. So the justice part of that really happens when we look and we're able to make something new out of ourselves that hitherto was not even perceived by other people or the individual. So let beauty change you; don't try to change it.

P. Carl, Creative Director at ArtsEmerson

I spend a lot of time working in Japan, where the image above was taken. The Hitachi Seaside Park is 470 acres and in April, 4.5 million of these flowers called "blue eyes" bloom. It reminds me of a quote from Rebecca Solnit that has stuck with me: "The nameless places awaken a desire to be lost, to be far away, a desire for that melancholy wonder that is the blue of distance." I've been obsessed with the privilege of distance, which I believe is very much intertwined with my understanding of beauty.

I've been working in the theater for twenty years now, and several years ago I just became fed up with the exclusive idea of a curator—and that's when I really started to think about beauty. Theater-maker Matthew Goulish makes a distinction between coming to art informed and coming to art ecstatic. My experience of working as a curator is that so many people in my field come informed, knowing what they know to be beautiful—and this is such a kind of exclusive version of beauty. So I've been working on a couple of things: One is exploring a different approach to curation which I call "The Curation of Listening," or, how to come to curation as an ecstatic person in the world versus informed about what constitutes beauty and art; two, I help run an online knowledge commons called HowlRound, where we think about how to create listening spaces where our notion of beauty can be more inclusive.

Charles Eisenstein, Speaker and Author of The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible

When I was twenty-two, I came across this book, Order Out of Chaos by Ilya Prigoginem, which is where I first encountered this piece of art—it blew me away, and really made

me wonder about the artist who created such a thing. I learned it's a little piece of a mathematical object called The Mandelbrot Set; so, basically, this was not created by an artist. The only reason it is like this is because it is like this—it's just the way it is. My analytic mind wants to understand: "Well how? And why?" If you zoom in to one little piece of it, you'll get entire new universes of forms; the complexity and beauty of it is endless. That experience has been working me for several decades now.

One of the ways it has worked me is that I understand that beauty isn't necessarily something imposed upon this inert, external, unconscious, unintelligent reality by the creators, by the "guy in charge." Instead, it is inherent, autochthonous, everywhere in everything. Our whole civilization is about imposing dominance—dominating an order and one's own idea of the way things should be. It points to a different kind or mode of technology, and by extension a different mode of governance, of education, even of medicine, that begins with listening and understanding. What is it that perhaps wants to be born outside of ourselves, that isn't created, that isn't something over which we can exert authorship?

One of the questions that comes up as I follow this line of thinking is the apparent conflation of beauty and art. The distinction between the fine arts and the useful arts is a new thing that only began a few hundred years ago. A lot of indigenous languages have no word for art, because it was so deeply integrated into life. By focusing on art as a separate category, it can very easily become this kind of decoration, or adornment onto a world that is not dedicated toward beauty, but is dedicated toward efficiency, productivity, the maximization of some measurable quantity—then festooned with some pretty things. I think what we really need to do is to reorient our civilization toward beauty, which is a qualitative thing, and away from the quantitative.

Teresita Fernández, Artist

There's a certain very beautiful Ancient Greek ostrakon from 487 BC at the Metropolitan Museum. An ostrakon is a piece of broken pottery which was used to write short notes on. Ostrakons were also the way Ancient Greek citizens would vote, by simply choosing a piece, writing the name of their candidate of choice and literally casting it into the heap to be counted. You could also vote for whomever you wanted to get rid of, which is where we get the word ostracize, beautiful etymology.

I was intrigued by the idea of how what seemed broken was transformed into a meaningful gesture that would essentially build consensus. We are taught to think that what is broken is useless, hopeless, or ugly. And so when we set out to create change we are, as artists, always aware that there is a great mute discomfort that lives alongside beauty.

The most resonant and enduring of values, like freedom, are always appreciated in dramas of separation, loss, longing, and brokenness. It's why something sad is also beautiful. It's why when I walk through a museum and see an unremarkable European

object made of gold, I am brought to tears also seeing and feeling in that same object the obliteration of an entire civilization's material culture, melted down, indignant, powerless.

In Japan, where I've lived, there is a reverence for the beauty of mending, a broken bowl would be valued precisely because of the exquisite nature of how it was patched with gold. Often we try to repair broken things in such a way as to conceal the fracture. But the tea masters understood that a conspicuous beautiful repair actually adds value. The wound being not forgotten, but incorporated into what makes it beautiful. A kind of redemption.

Witnessing beauty is an active form of recognizing yourself in things that are not you. The heartbreaking droop of a flower in an Ikebana arrangement can summon up all of human suffering, coding our shared sense of exile. When we feel this, when we understand things not because we are told to or because read a label, but rather because we sense it, it becomes part of the way we see the world. That recognizing ourselves both in art and in others is what is at the core of art and social justice.

There's a side-stepping that beauty employs. It's not that the work is "about" social justice. It's that the beauty in an artwork can be used as a springboard to attach other urgencies. Beauty seduces, it holds attention. It creates a space and a pause where other messages can be lodged, gently, subtly placed to linger. The word aesthetic, in its original form, actually means to make aware. Its opposite is anesthetic, so if doctors anesthetize people so that they don't feel anything, then artists in turn must enable them to feel palpably connected.

But who gets to occupy the space of beauty? Who has visibility? This year there were 68 violent deaths of unarmed Latinos at the hands of police officers that went virtually unheard of. No hashtags, no witnesses, because those that were present are also undocumented and silenced. No media coverage. I can't help but correlate that the same lack of presence when I look at the glaring omissions of Latinos in museums across this country. If museums, then, are places where consensus gets made, where we go to commune with visual beauty. Where contemporary culture and ideas about social justice are visually unraveled for us to learn from. What happens when the spaces of beauty are also systematically closed off? That space of access is where beauty relies on equity as much as equity relies on beauty.

Carol Graham, Well-Being Researcher at the Brookings Institution

I've had so many moments of beauty in my life, but one of the most moving was when my daughter decided she wanted to play guitar (I play too when I'm not doing economics). She's very driven—she started lessons and practiced all the time—but she's also very shy. Last year, at the annual birthday party we have for my older son and I, she played a song for me in front of 50 people. It was a huge deal for her, and such an important, multi-dimensional moment: The music was beautiful; the fact that somebody

young finally gotten to the point that she could make art and lose herself in music was beautiful; it was such an intergenerational human experience, and I realize not everybody gets to have those.

I diverge a bit from the usual economist because I work on well-being, happiness, and peoples' capacity to lead fulfilling lives—and I think beauty is included in that. Lately, there has been a lot of talk in my profession about putting wellbeing metrics into our official statistics, in the context of two different types. There is Benthamite wellbeing, or how people experience their days: Are they content? Are they worried? Are they anxious? Are they stressed? But then there is another dimension of wellbeing which encompasses how people evaluate their lives as a whole—their opportunities in life, their ability to imagine what their life will be like, what their opportunities will be like. That also includes Aristotle's concept of eudemonia, which is purpose or meaning; if you think about the pursuit of happiness in the Jeffersonian sense, he was talking about this Aristotelian kind.

My latest book, *Happiness for All?*, is about the inequality of wellbeing in the United States. I've studied wellbeing around the world in very poor countries and very poor contexts, you often find very poor people who report to be very happy; they aren't starving, they have their friends and family, they're alive that day—in the moment, they are okay. The extent to which poor people live day to day—with lots of stress, no insurance, and a lot of uncertainty—means that they don't have the luxury or the capability to plan their lives; to think about the education and opportunities their children will have; or will they be able to play a beautiful guitar song; or have the luxury of taking guitar lessons.

There was a recent study of the most searched words on Google by people who live in the "easy" places to live in the United States and in the "difficult" places to live—say, the Northwest, DC, and Portland versus Baltimore and Detroit. And in the difficult places to live, the words were "stress," "religion," "antichrist," "diabetes," "guns," "video games," and "fad diets," by people living with stressful, short-term horizons. The words in the easy places to live were "baby bjorns," "baby ipads," "foam rollers," and exotic travel destinations like Machu Picchu (I'm from Peru so I like this one), by people who were investing in their own health, investing in knowledge, investing in their children's knowledge, and in broadening their horizons by seeing beautiful things. Two different worlds and yet these are people in the same country. In my view, the fact that there's so many people in the US now who are compromised in their ability to lead to this broader dimension of wellbeing or deeper dimension of wellbeing is an injustice, and I think it links to beauty.

Trajal Harrell, Choreographer and dancer

I'd like to talk about three strands of things that go together; the first is an experience of beauty. People told me La Grande Bellezza was a great movie, so I had been saving it to watch for almost a year-and-a-half. Finally, two weeks ago, I put it on. Thirty minutes in I

stopped the movie because I wanted to savor it. I felt I had come upon something that reflected a sense of liveness and aesthetics that I could not have perceived before, and it was so beautiful that I didn't want it to end. But I also wanted to be prepared to see the rest of it; I felt like I needed to wait, because beauty is seductive and it's also… something I'm suspicious of.

Later, I put on The Skinny, which I thought was just a stupid movie to pass the time. I was quite shocked because it was full of all these beautiful black men and I was like: 'Oh my god.' Where have these men been? I was just shocked that I was seeing these men. I started to realize that because I spend a lot of time in Europe, I purposely try to avoid and ignore the Black Lives Matter movement as much as possible, because like Baldwin I'm tired and I don't want to pay attention sometimes. But I started to think: 'Have these men been given the chance to think that they are beautiful? Who gives black men the opportunity to really be beautiful?" There are no magazines dedicated to it. There are no agencies dedicated to it. Maybe Kanye West is the first openly beautiful black man in America; maybe he's the first one to come out of the closet as beautiful. Because black men aren't really taught that is a possibility for them.

The last thing is about my recent two-year residency at MoMA. I made a piece and I thought it was the most beautiful piece I ever made–so I asked myself: 'Why?' I think it's because I felt like all the things I had been working on–like the voguing dance tradition in relation to the post-modern dance tradition, which obviously has to do with appropriating ideals of beauty–had been boiled down to their essence into something that was pure movement. You know, Martha Graham once said: 'Don't forget that orange juice is an abstraction of an orange.' And I felt like I had finally gotten my orange juice. But I also felt that it was beautiful because it was questioning itself. I was questioning all the aesthetic privileges and hierarchies that had come before it.

Gladstone "Fluney" Hutchinson, Associate Professor of Economics at Lafayette College

During my recent sojourn as head of national planning and chief advisor on economics, environment and social policy to the Cabinet and the Parliament in Jamaica (2010-13), an important focus was on coordinating efforts to renew and redevelop poor working class communities where residents lived with vulnerability, volatility and distress. I understood how essential it was for residents to be encouraged and facilitated in shaping and telling their own narrative, and appreciated the challenge that trying to do so would pose because of their existing relationships with politicians and strongmen. Residents were generally afraid to have aspirations that transcended their current state of desperation and deprivation, which was anchored in a clientele relationship with politicians and criminal strongmen. This was an incredible injustice and injury on residents.

I juxtapose this with my experience with residents in the rural community of Lagunitas in the Yoro region of Honduras in 2009. There I witnessed beauty and justice come together! My student team and I had been collaborating with Lagunitas residents since

the summer of 2007 on a project that would re-imagine and build their community based on combining economic empowerment, agency and development with environmental stewardship. The project was successful, the community's voice was strengthened, and during the region's annual summer Festival of the Fish (Lluvia de Pesces), Lagunitas folks, who in recent past had been coming into the city to find day's work, were now riding on the white horses behind the Mayor as he celebrated all the good things that had happened that year. Residents used their growing community wealth to build a community center for social and civic meetings, to host a nurse monthly to attend to the needs of the children and the elderly; the women of the village managed the financial affairs, sat on the local school board and proudly ensured that the Village of Lagunitas paid taxes and warmly received government workers who now visited their village to address their needs. Residents took great pride in their industry and success being recognized by other communities and the region's government —a dignity in being visible and praised for being accomplished and worthy! They were no longer "hombres" and "mujeres"; instead they had transcended into becoming Señors and Señoritas. This was beauty as justice!

Sunil Iyengar, Director of Research and Analysis for the National Endowment for the Arts

When I was asked to describe an instance of beauty in my life, I found—to my surprise, and then distress—that it was difficult to think of a single occasion. The reason it was distressful was because I thought that maybe I've already become that person who can't even latch onto a moment of transcendence or luminousness; that I was that emotional cliche, unable to revert to childhood when colors were brighter, everything was much more vivid. I was worried about that for a while. And then I realized that maybe the best way to think about it was to consider two abstract qualities, or dimensions, of how one encounters beauty.

One of the dimensions is temporal–the anticipation of the experience of beauty. The other is the apprehension of beauty—its flicker and withdrawal, and then our subsequent recollection of beauty, which is often alloyed or even adulterated. Sensual, erotic, religious, spiritual, transcendent, and intellectual: I don't think any of these categories are mutually exclusive.

Generosity is often associated with beauty, but it's a generosity and openness in receiving as well as giving. I keep coming back to this idea of ampleness, which gives an illusion of almost limitless time—a sensation that time is slipping away but you're not bothered by it. So if I had to pick a moment like this, it's probably when I try to write poetry.

Anna Marazuela Kim, Associate Fellow at the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture

I grew up in a small Midwestern town; it was a rough place, devoid of beauty, and ugly with prejudice. It was tough growing up Asian in the wake of the Vietnam War and so much hatred that spilled over towards our family. My parents were immigrants and each had been displaced by earlier, different wars in their countries: my father by the Korean War which he escaped by fleeing North for South and translating for the US Army. He joked he taught himself English by reading *Archie* comics (which I believed), and eventually made his way, improbably, to MIT. On the other side of the world, my mother survived the bombing of Madrid during the Spanish Civil War. She went on to study classical music, which became a lifelong passion—indeed a lifeline for her. Both of my parents lost much in their native countries, but it's what they carried with them that brings me here today.

My earliest memory of beauty is the sound of my mother's violin. She played in the basement where she did the laundry and ironing for our family of seven before we got up and the chaos began. And after she put us to bed, there was a laundry chute that connected the basement to my bedroom at the head of my bed, forming a kind of conduit for sound to travel between. And thus my waking and drifting off to sleep—those liminal moments when dream and reality are blurred—were shaped by her music, appearing and rising magically each morning and night, softly filling my room. A performance of beauty, but also of love and perseverance, of transcendence in the face of difficulty. So music was my first, pre-rational training in beauty.

The other was literature, and the encounter with my father's library; books thrown into boxes he carried with him from two years at Ripon College before heading to MIT. Language had saved my father during the Korean War; it became a similar salve for me. Reading the classics, I discovered a second language of beauty, not only in the imaginary worlds that transported me from the conflicts of my own, but a connection—a deep connection—to world and history; and later, this became a potent resource for weaving my own words and stories to overcome the hatred and prejudice of my peers. These were the twin gifts of beauty bestowed by my parents. For me they are as fundamental as the very life they gave me, forming my capacities for living. I could not have survived and thrived without them.

Now, I'm going to get academic to talk about justice. A long history of beauty in its relation to justice might be traced from the Ancient Greek term "*ho kalos*," which denotes a kind of excellence or virtue and is often paired with "*ho agathos*"—the Good—to Plato, the metaphysical and epistemological unity of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty, and the Aristotelian view in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* that human flourishing finds its fullest expression in the just *polis*, or society.

In the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti further develops the connection between beauty and civic virtue, when he argues in *De Re Aedificatoria* that it is the beauty of a

city and its buildings that "makes justice visible." And then later, Jacques Rancière takes the idea in a more radical direction in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. And even now, surveys such as ResPublica's "A Community Right to Beauty" make this point: that beauty is not just the icing on the cake of society, but rather a fundamental source of nourishment everyone deserves. Now on an intuitive level, beauty's integral relation to justice may perhaps best be seen in its inverse: the ugliness of injustice, the blight of economic and racial slums. Clearly there is a connection between human flourishing and a just society that's integrally bound up with the built environment and the possibilities it affords. Yet when beauty is ranged against other dimensions of culture, especially those that seem to more directly address fundamental aspects of thriving, such as economics, its significance recedes from view. So it is the aim of my research for Thriving Cities to reclaim and more clearly articulate beauty's foundational role for cities and to a more just society, as one of six interconnected endowments that form a framework for assessing the vitality of a given city or neighborhood. And by beauty we include the built environment and urban design crucial to the infrastructure of the city, the role of the arts at the level of community, and more broadly the aesthetic orientation fundamental to human life and its capacity to foster attitudes of care for the urban commons.

Diane Ragsdale, Visiting Artist and Lecturer, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Business

I recently taught a course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for business school students, called Approaching Beauty. Essentially this was a course aimed at helping business majors approach beauty—as an idea and also as an experience—and cultivate what one might call an "aesthetic sensibility," while learning to see the world through something other than an economic lens. I think of it as a response to Michael Sandel's notion in What Money Can't Buy, that the ethos of the culture has been replaced by the ethos of the market.

One of the texts I assigned for the course was Elaine Scarry's Tanner Lectures, published as a monograph called *On Beauty and Being Just*. Scarry makes a direct link between beauty and justice beginning with an etymological reflection on how the two words both share a synonym: the word fairness. Relatedly, she argues that the opposite of beauty is not ugliness—but rather injury. And I think right there she gives us a really interesting idea about how beauty relates to justice.

Scarry also talks about making two types of errors with beauty. The first type of error is one in which something first appears beautiful, but we later come to realize that it is not so. The aesthetics of politics these days is an example of this. Gentrification is another example. There as an initial appearance of beauty but if we begin to ask questions about what happened to the people who lived in this place before it became such a coveted neighborhood we come to realize that the gentrification process has been anything but beautiful for them. We can see the injuries to some for the sake of others.

In the arts—the sector that I have worked in most of my life—I relate this type of error to the large institutions that are often heralded and held up as models, pinnacles of achievement and glory. And yet some of these large institutions are exploitative of artists; are exclusive even while espousing inclusivity; or are increasingly transactional in the way that they relate to their communities. On the surface they appear beautiful, but if we look beyond the buildings and the works themselves, we can often identify processes or policies or practices that one might characterize as injurious.

The second type of error is one in which we initially discount something as not beautiful, but later—often because of a shift in context or new information—we are able to see the beauty in the thing we once rejected. For Scarry, this was palm trees. And this type of error also relates to justice. It draws our attention to the idea that we may be rejecting, ignoring, or discounting certain people, places, objects, ideas, and experiences simply because we are lacking the cultural context necessary to perceive their beauty. It teaches us to be cautious about such dismissals. In the professional nonprofit arts, I think our lack of interest in, and in some cases the outright disdain for, grassroots, community-based arts initiatives is an example of this.

When I asked the students to write to me and tell me how, if at all, the course was changing them, one student wrote: "This course is transforming us into people who care." By the end of the term, I began to call it a course in human development.

Something that I find beautiful is the theatrical work *The Provenance of Beauty*, a piece that Claudia Rankine created with The Foundry Theatre. It was an extraordinary site-specific theater work in which participants boarded a bus in East Harlem that took them on a ride through the South Bronx. Claudia wrote the text for the piece, which was, essentially, an incredibly moving dialogue with the South Bronx, which demonstrated quite purely the link between beauty and justice. It made me aware not only of my type II error in relationship to the South Bronx, but of my many type II errors (to use Scarry's diagnosis). It gave me pause and made me think about the people and places—in New York alone—that I had inadvertently dismissed and that I had never taken the time to know.

Of course, this is something that art does.

Claudia Rankine, Poet

See Claudia's piece on the perceived relationship between whiteness and beauty.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_lC9jVJdrA&feature=youtu.be

Maria Rosario Jackson, Senior Advisor, Arts and Culture, Kresge Foundation

I found that I had to ask myself a lot of questions in order to articulate a time in my own personal life when I have experienced the power of beauty: "When have I been moved to tears? To laughter? To deep melancholy? To sadness? When have I felt most connected or fully connected? If I were to lose all of my possessions, what would I keep?

If I had to give it all up, what would I keep? If I were to lose most of my memory, what would I want to remember?" And really what I was asking was: "When have I allowed myself to surrender to the full experience of feelings?"

I kept coming back to when I was eighteen, and my grandmother gave me her diaries from when she was my age at the time, and told me that she wanted me to know her. In them, she was a student at Wilberforce, which is a historically Black college in Ohio, and she was navigating that eighteen-year-old life of that era; so, making hard choices about race, about her responsibility, about having an elastic heart and falling in and out of love. About things that are really minute and things that are huge. And I realized that it's evidence of an interrogative life. A very meaningful life.

As an urban planner, I'm often asked why I do arts and culture stuff, because people don't typically think about those two disciplines going together. And my response has become: If arts and culture are so powerful that they have to be stripped away in order to disempower, conquer, or weaken, then why don't we think of them as essential to build up as well?

I think that part of their value is this ability to lead an interrogative life, a thoughtful existence where we can make meaning. If we don't have that—if that isn't available to us by virtue of circumstance, discrimination, structural inequalities—that's a justice issue. Control over our narrative, both individual and collective, is important for justice.

Sarah Ruhl, Playwright

Let me start by quoting Elizabeth Bishop, who once wrote to Robert Lowell:

> Oh heavens, when does one begin to write the real poems? I certainly feel as if I never had. But of course I don't feel that way about yours. They all seem real as real and getting more so. They all have that sure feeling, as if you'd been in a stretch when everything and anything suddenly seemed material for poetry, or not material, seemed to be poetry. If only one could see everything that way all the time. It seems to me it's the whole purpose of art. That rare feeling of control, illuminating. Life is alright, for the time being.

Bishop describes so accurately the feeling an artist or an audience has when seized by the feeling of beauty: That life actually *is* poetry; that life is alright for the moment.

Now I want to tell you about another woman poet I know. Jennifer June Buckley is a poet of rare gifts and embodies Bishop's vision of seeing life as poetry much of the time. I met her twenty years ago at a creative writing class I was teaching for developmentally disabled adults in Blackstone Valley Industries in Pawtucket, Rhode Island—a place not known for its beauty. Jennifer—who has Down Syndrome—wrote constantly in remarkable streams about the beauty of ordinary life and the people she knew. Here is one of her poems:

> Keeping a journal/looks like a white bird/I am your friend/I am your girlfriend/I am your boyfriend/I am in the hospital/very long time/Saw my doctor/I was six years old/I forgot tell him/Happy Valentine's Day/Name is Dr. Phillip Lucas/Came my rescue.

She startled me into beauty. She made me see beauty in a place full of cigarette butts, unpleasant smells, and the promise of burned Dunkin Donuts coffee after longs stretches of monotonous piece-work. She made poetry that transformed everyday life. Her poetry could shake a cynic by the shoulders and say: "Pay attention to beauty." It is the power of close observation suffused with love.

We are also talking today about justice—not helpfulness—but I do think that when we talk about social justice and art we are also talking about equality and access and helpfulness and usefulness, rather than seeing art as encased in a platonic and hermetic vacuum apart from the people who are served by it.

When writing my play *The Oldest Boy*, which featured a reincarnated Tibetan Lama, I called many people in the Tibetan community for help and insight. I'll never forget when I wrote to a Tibetan scholar who wrote back immediately: "I am happy to talk with you as your play might benefit other sentient beings." I thought: "Oh my. He is assuming that art is helpful." When we rehearsed *The Oldest Boy* at Lincoln Center we had two Tibetan Lamas come visit and answer questions and bless the room. At one point, Lama Pema looked at us keenly and said: "Art and religion aren't very different." Then he started laughing and said: "And someone's got to do it." Then he laughed some more. His laughter held conviction that art and religion are difficult and also essential to a culture that values consciousness and gentleness. He said: "For Tibetans, culture is our capital. We have an economy of culture." He told us when the Dalai Lama went into exile after the occupation of Tibet, the first thing that he did was to set up a training program in India to preserve Tibetan dance, music, and art. The first act of the nation in exile was not to set up an army, but instead to preserve culture.

This confidence in art's helpful quality is not a deeply held conviction in this country—though it might be a deeply held unconscious belief held by artists—but it's not confidently articulated in the culture at large. In our culture, art is often defined by its very uselessness; but artists know that art is not useless, or else they would not make it. Audiences know that art is not useless, or else they would not come. What if one primary goal of justice were to create a world in which all people can experience and create beauty? If empathy for the other is a precondition for justice, and if beauty creates empathy, then perhaps in a world of diminishing empathy and increasing violence, we all must make more room for art.

Martin Seligman, Director, Positive Psychology Center, University of Pennsylvania

I'd like to share one moment, and one thought.

Thirty years ago, I was sitting in the front row of the Berlin Philharmonic, near the very end of of the Mahler's Second. At the word auferstehung—"resurrection"—I burst into tears. The soprano looked at me, and then she burst into tears. The performance was disrupted.

The thought—and you're not going to find this congenial—but beauty is dangerous. Beauty, unlike almost anything I know, gets under the cognitive radar. It enables a message that you might resist to become believable. We've talked about Picasso and Douglass, but we need to be reminded of Leni Riefenstahl and Stalin. That both Hitler and Stalin thought they were in the service of social justice. Both of them used that word. And Riefenstahl and Stalinist beauty is a vehicle of propaganda. We live in a society in which there is huge disagreement, maybe not around this table, about what constitutes social justice. And therefore, we have to be aware that what we are talking about is double-edged.

Steven Tepper, Dean, Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts, Arizona State University

I'm a sociologist and public policy scholar, and recently made dean of Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University, which is the largest design and art school in a research university in the country. And it's a remarkable place that informs how I think about justice.

Traditionally, universities improve their rankings by excluding more and more people. In our ASU charter, we have defined ourselves against the metric; measuring ourselves not by who we exclude, but who we include and how well they do.

Arts and design training has largely been seen as the privilege of those that can afford both the education—it's the most expensive education of any discipline the arts degree—and the opportunity cost. Many families don't feel like they can afford to send their kids to get an arts degree, and I think that is a huge cultural crisis for America when our storytellers don't represent the demographic of this country. In the Herberger Institute, we have twelve-hundred Latinx and Native American artists—the most in this country. We have almost forty-percent first-generation students.

I'd like to share a beautiful story from a photo exhibit that a senior, Amanda Morales, presented last year: Twenty unbelievable portraits of women who are, or were, teenage mothers, and their children. Amanda was the daughter of a teenage mom and lived with this stigma, but these photographs turned something that society has basically told us is shameful into something unbelievably powerful. She gave humanity back to these moms and these children with such care; she showed the courage in their faces, and the optimism; the love; the hope—all the things we think are missing from that idea of

teenage motherhood were there. So for me it was seeing something beautiful in something we might otherwise see differently.

Krista Tippett, "On Being" Radio Host

I'm very aware of how journalism applies incredible sophistication and energy to analyzing what is catastrophic, corrupt, inadequate, and failing; part of what I want to do is figure out how to apply that kind of sophistication to the possibility of beauty among us, with all the complexity that implies. I cleave to a notion that my profession can be a healing art; I want to believe that's true, and I want to work towards that, however much evidence there is to the contrary.

When I think about the connection between beauty writ large—visual beauty, beautiful language, natural beauty, beautiful lives—and justice, or social healing, I see that what beauty does is it unsettles. It taps into spirit as well as intellect. It can be a source of courage and it can be a source of hope. And it can create this frame for a larger sense of what is possible, even if we don't know what that is.

I have come to think of beauty as a core moral value. I take that language from my Muslim conversation partners; that God is beautiful and loves beauty, and whether something is beautiful or ugly—which is also to say whether it is creative or destructive—is as much a litmus test of whether something is of God as any other kind of orthodox litmus test. I also hear scientist after scientist, mathematician after mathematician, equate beauty and truth; that if an equation is not beautiful and elegant, then it is probably not true. I think of the social venture capitalist I interviewed who works with some of the poorest people in the world, and one of the questions she's learned to ask is: "What are you doing when you feel most beautiful?" This is a question that unlocks their own capacities for finding beauty in moment after moment in the course of ordinary days, but in addition enhancing their sense of what might be possible. and their agency in that.

The week that Arizona Representative Gabrielle Giffords was shot—a week of national tragedy—I had already posted a conversation with [poet and Ford Foundation Director of Creativity and Free Expression] Elizabeth Alexander, and it was all about beauty. Elizabeth talked about how we need a new language to approach each other, which is one of the things poetry does. But I was worried. *We're putting a poet on the air in this week of national tragedy. Will this seem beside the point? Will it seem offensive?* Then I watched it climb on iTunes. We've hardly ever had that kind of response. People were so starved, and it was so important to hear about "words that shimmer." In so many contexts, those can be an antidote to the way we went about things in the 20th century—whether it was political solutions or global economic development—of defining things in terms of issues and problems. I sense that the vocabulary of justice work has actually assumed this antiseptic lens of seeing everything and approaching everything as an "issue," with a cold vocabulary of problems to solve. To see beauty in

another person creates also a necessary dimension to how we define what is wrong and how we think about how to move beyond it.

Alexandra T. Vazquez, Associate Professor of Performance Studies at New York University

Beauty does not lie in waiting for our discovery of it. It can't be managed and refuses function. It encourages anti-colonial sensibilities towards all things. I want to suggest an available model that flows through you even if you don't tune in—the experience of the DJ Alex Sensation Show on La Mega 97.9—a very important radio station in New York—Monday through Friday from 11am to 3pm. He does something called the Mega Mezcla during his workaday set. Roughly translated, it's a "Mega-Mix" of different things: pipes out from the half-open door of a delivery truck; speakers behind the counter at the corner deli; toll-booth operators on their choked up radio. The sensation of listening to this reminds the city of how its function gives workers a place to keep functioning.

He will tenderly and exuberantly shout-out carpenters and bodegueros; daycare workers; housekeepers; home health aides; secretaries and bakery employees; body shop garages and carwashes; with their migrations, and the chords they strike as the city. The Mega Mezcla testifies to the ordinary and dramatic and forced and chosen ways that many have arrived to New York to make it swing; it's a joyful and difficult beauty that messes with anyone who tries to lament the city's long-gone energies. DJ Sensation offers a platform for Latino health; this radio show signals New York's real bohemia.

In contrast this bohemia, there are those who would discipline and deny such beauty without regard for killing it. In too many academic parts across the ideological spectrum, beauty and aesthetics have long been considered suspect, or made to mean something singular, or used as trade to back up an argument. So it is vital to take cues from all the adjunct artists and residents in our institutions, and the worlds made by those like Sensation's Mega Mezclas that teach us we've too long ceded talk of aesthetics, of aesthetic traditions, to those who are invested in deracinating them and taking away our humor. I want to hold on to a sense of health that doesn't depend upon diagnosis from an outside expert, but one that embraces the bad diagnosis, rejects wholeness, or even being well, and instead finds in immigrant brokenness, in the bad diagnosis, in this music, the beauty of rebellions from several antiquities and continents against undifferentiated masters. DJ Sensation makes a dance floor of their graves.