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Dave Hickey's Politics of Beauty

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Everybody, it seems, is writing about Dave Hickey, but nobody's really concentrating on the 74-year-old maverick art critic's thorny, profound ideas about beauty. That is understandable. After decades of lambasting the academic side of the art world for institutionalizing mediocrity, and after recently proclaiming that the gallery-museum part of that world has turned into a venal, celebrity-stoked social scene that has no use for serious art criticism, Hickey has announced that he's through with writing about contemporary art. Naturally, a flood of interviews and personality profiles has followed.

Of course, Hickey might not be telling the truth about giving up art criticism. He could be pulling a sneaky Marcel Duchamp nonwithdrawal-withdrawal. (After famously announcing that he was giving up art for chess, the godfather of Dada spent his last 20 years secretly creating the great peek-through-the-peephole installation "*Étant donnés,*" now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.)

As Hickey sails off into announced self-imposed exile from art criticism, he trails a lot of art-critical credentials in his wake. Not only was he awarded the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism (equivalent to an Oscar) in 1994, but he also entered the greater intellectual pantheon when he was awarded a MacArthur "genius" fellowship in 2001. And he's topped off his long, long art critic's CV with a catalog essay for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's retrospective of the great California ceramic sculptor Ken Price (the show will travel to Dallas and New York) and a book on female artists (tentatively titled, in typical Hickeyan fashion, *Hot Chicks*) that he's now polishing up.

I first met Dave Hickey a few decades ago, through my husband, Peter Plagens, who also writes art criticism. It wasn't until 2002, however, that I really got to see him in action. Sharing a hired town car with him (Hickey doesn't like public transportation) from New York to Philadelphia for a College Art Association annual meeting, where we were both on panels, I must have heard him utter his almost trademark "Y'know what I mean?" a hundred times, with my window cracked open to the cold to let out the smoke from his ever-present cigarettes. Once at the meeting, I hung out with him while he practiced his Las Vegas approach to life, spreading $20 bills around in order to, among other things, get us a table in a "fully booked" restaurant. Hickey is by no means rich, but he knows how to make a trip better for everyone around him by greasing the right wheels.

> His ideas as an art critic are incompatible with the art world's absorption in theory.

During five or six long conversations, beginning last summer and lasting well into the fall, Hickey and I talked about his ideas about beauty and education and, of course, his dissatisfaction with the contemporary art world. Although he insisted that he means it when he says he's giving up art criticism, it's not as if he's leaping from art criticism into the void.

He's editing the final draft of the tentatively titled *Pagan America* (forthcoming from Simon & Schuster), which celebrates the side of America that loves material pleasure, contrasted with its dominant Christian worldview of a greater, post-earthly purpose. And he's finishing yet another book on beauty (also due out in 2013)—*Pirates and Farmers: Essays on Culture and the Marketplace* (Karsten Schubert, London).

Over the years, Hickey has produced a steady stream of essays on a wide range of topics other than art—rock 'n' roll, jazz, Liberace, sports, cars—in such varied publications as *The New York Times, The Texas Observer, Rolling Stone, Art in America, Artforum, Interview, Harper's*, and *Playboy*, to name a few.

Hickey's art stardom, however, derives mostly from two short books—*The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Art Issues Press, 1993, and a revised and expanded edition from the University of Chicago Press, 2009) and *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy* (Art Issues Press, 1997). The art world's enthusiastic response to those books, however, is puzzling; their theme is how the art world has, by abandoning beauty, descended into the hell of boredom.

Since about 1970, serious contemporary artists, art critics, and curators have done their damnedest to quarantine the word "beauty" from inclusion in any discussion of art. Instead, borrowing heavily from critical theory, they've larded their talk about art with such academically saturated fats as "dialogues," "hybridization," "critical practice," "semiotics," "dialectics," "synthesis," "political discourse," and others too enervating to mention. With *Invisible Dragon* and *Air Guitar*, Hickey dared to drag beauty out of hiding and place it back at the center of art.

One might have thought the art world's reaction would have been dismissal or ostracism. Instead—almost perversely—artists, critics, dealers, collectors, art professors, and, especially, their M.F.A. students bought the books and showed them off on their coffee tables. Professors even placed selections from them on their syllabi.

What strikes anyone who has seriously studied Hickey's essays is the incompatibility of his ideas about beauty with an art world, and an art-education establishment, absorbed in abstract theory. How could the very people who find beauty an anachronistic drag on art simultaneously have treated Dave Hickey as an intellectual hero?

Although *Invisible Dragon*, in particular, drew Hickey a long list of invitations to lecture and do visiting-critic gigs, he wrote that after its publication, his "life became a lot less pleasant." For all his newfound fame and glory, his ideas about beauty rendered him a reactionary to those who thought that art should better

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concern itself with feminism, racism, anticapitalism, global warming, DNA sequencing, and that evergreen, "the Other." More surprising is that even though Newsweek listed *Air Guitar* in 2009 as "one of the most important books of the century," the wider intellectual world has uttered barely a peep about Hickey's ideas on beauty. Consider, by contrast, the attention lavished on Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton University Press, 1999), or, more recently, Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

Perhaps this neglect results from Hickey's coming off to most brokers of big ideas—that is, academics—as not merely an iconoclast but a vulgarian. Scholars find it difficult to accept that he chose to make Las Vegas his home for most of his adult life. They are put off by the fact that he calms himself by gambling and chain-

smoking. They are contemptuous of his spending a lot of his early years consumed by rock 'n' roll, hanging out with the likes of Hunter S. Thompson, Nick Tosches, and Lester Bangs, and writing articles about (to use Hickey's words) "subjects with the shelf life of milk."

Academics don't understand how a serious intellectual could have spent so many years not doing academic work, instead snorting cocaine and jamming with the Nashville-based singer-songwriter Marshall Chapman. (They were "romantically involved," Hickey says, and wrote songs together in the 70s; he also was her tour manager and, when needed, played rhythm guitar.) And academics certainly don't like it that a man who spent so much time on different college faculties would have the gall to bash his academic colleagues and higher education in general.

Educated in what he refers to as "the liberating discourse of French Structuralism," Hickey dismisses its American disciples as "misshapen offspring." With his take-no-prisoners attitude, he writes in openly derisive terms about the watered-down, enfeebled American version of French thought: "Somehow, the delicate instrumentalities of continental thought had been transmuted by the American professoriate into a highfalutin, pseudo-progressive billy club with which to beat dissenters about the head and shoulders."

Hickey's relationship with academe has always been fraught, the strands of his contentiousness going back to his childhood. Hickey's mother, from whom he was estranged for most of his life, was both a professor of economics and a successful businesswoman. Hickey says that although she was a "terrible mother," she was basically a good, smart person who liked to paint and took her son to museums at an early age. He says he learned about music from his father, a jazz musician who made his living selling Chevys and who committed suicide when Hickey was 11. (Soon after, Hickey left his mother to live with his grandmother.)

Hickey's was a peripatetic childhood, which stretched from Texas to California and had him attending 13 grammar schools. At 15, he finished high school in California and returned to Texas to attend Southern Methodist University, where he majored in math and engineering and minored in economics. After two years, he transferred to Texas Christian University, changing his major to English and creative writing. He studied with the likes of Larry McMurtry, John Graves, and Lyle H. Kendall Jr., but told me his youth was centered on "driving fast, taking speed, and making spontaneous romantic decisions."

In 1961, Hickey entered the University of Texas at Austin for graduate study in creative writing and theoretical linguistics, earning an M.A. in English. His doctoral dissertation in linguistics was an analytical (close to mathematical) approach to literature that, when completed, faced such strong resistance from his committee that he knew there was no point in staying around for the defense. Hickey concluded that academe was a place for timid souls who "resisted big ideas."

Having turned his back on an academic career (in 1967 a Ph.D. in the humanities from a major university was still more or less a ticket to a good college-teaching job), Hickey and his first wife, Mary Jane Taylor, borrowed $10,000 to open a contemporary art gallery—called A Clean Well-lighted Place—in their rented house. (He had become friends with the younger art faculty and the more adventuresome graduate students at Texas.) Although it was at the time the only serious gallery of its kind in Austin—a city more devoted to football and "outlaw" country music than to avant-garde art—the couple made a modest living from it for a few years.

> When he's in attack mode, which is much of the time, Hickey's favorite targets are rich collectors, art museums, and academe.

In 1969 the Hickeys closed up shop and moved to New York, where he ran one of the first SoHo galleries for two years and, when it closed, landed a job as executive editor at one of the country's two most influential art magazines, *Art in America*. There he began his freelance writing career

in earnest. Although he eventually published a book of short stories (*Prior Convictions*, Southern Methodist University Press, 1989)—a book many saw as a stunning debut—it troubled him that writing fiction amounted to creating and destroying characters at will. He switched from fiction to criticism.

But by the late 1980s, Hickey was no longer the energetic, druggy youngster who resembled a somewhat fleshier version of Jean-Paul Belmondo. He was facing the cold reality that freelancing would never get him either away from dope or into a health-insurance plan. He decided to give academe another try, earning a string of visiting appointments. From Las Vegas, he would fly for a semester here and a semester there. From 1988 to 2012, he taught at more than 15 colleges and art schools, including Otis College of Art and Design, Rice University, the University of California at Santa Barbara, Harvard, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and the University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

From 1998 to 2000, Hickey embraced the academic world he had spurned for so long, accepting an appointment as a professor of art theory and criticism at Las Vegas. After being awarded his MacArthur grant, in 2001, he leveraged the honor to get himself transferred out of the art department (which he regarded as a typical academic bastion of feel-good mediocrity) into the English department, as Schaeffer Professor of Modern Letters, a position he held until 2004. Hickey's most recent position, from which he retired in 2012, was at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque, where his wife, Libby Lumpkin, is a professor of art history and criticism. After being kicked out of their rented home for smoking, and living in a motel for a few months, they've just closed on a house in Santa Fe, purchased with money that Hickey got by auctioning off some of his art collection.

Hickey told me he writes "because I'm good at it and it's fun." Along with taking on bread-and-butter art-critical subjects—Leonardo, Cézanne, Warhol, Ellsworth Kelly, Edward Ruscha—he has explored the phenomena of strippers, honky-tonks, gambling, basketball, dope, and his adopted hometown, Las Vegas. When he's in attack mode—which is much of the time—his favorite targets are rich collectors (for ruining the art market, and art along with it, by buying and selling art strictly as an investment), and art museums and philanthropic art organizations (for bureaucratizing creativity). And, of course, academe.

Although Hickey is known as the art critic who writes about beauty, few outside the art world seem to have bothered to think seriously about his arguments, which are both original and radical. His thought takes him into the realm of political philosophy, where he attempts to ground beauty in democracy through ideas found in the Federalist Papers, Thomas Paine, Cicero, and, more broadly, the guiding principles of the Roman Republic.

During one phone conversation we had, the subject of David Hume and the problem of subjectivity in taste came up. Hickey said bluntly, "I'm a relativist." Like Hume, in his essay "Of the Standard of Taste," Hickey considers attempts to locate any universal standard of beauty futile. The only thing that matters is the audience. Unlike Hume, however, Hickey says ranking the audience according to levels of refinement, or aptitude for taste, is wrongheaded. What interests him are the varieties of audiences, all of which experience beauty with equal intensity. It's a simple insight on which Hickey constructs his whole philosophy of beauty.

Whenever we say the word "beautiful" in front of others, he argues, our feelings are transformed from private experiences into actions with public consequences, taking us into the political arena of give and take—what he calls "wrangling" over ideas that, in essence, resembles the disputes over the value of physical things in the capitalist marketplace. We utter the word "beauty," Hickey contends, at least in part "because we are good democrats, who aspire to transparency and consensus."

> We also [speak] the word "beauty" and respond to its being spoken because we are citizens of a self-consciously historical society. We count these personal responses as votes for the way things should look or sound; we acknowledge the chance that, once made transparent, these spontaneous exclamations may presage a new consensus.

Hickey's originality lies in situating beauty neither in the rarefied, abstract, spiritual sky nor in the narrow,

restricted world of privileged elites. Rather, beauty lives among ordinary folk—no matter their taste—manifesting itself in daily visual desires, brought to the surface through speech. We experience beauty in our encounters with things that we happen to find delightful. Beauty bubbles up all the time—most powerfully when we can't help ourselves from telling others, out loud, that we find something beautiful.

As a consequence of our speaking up about beauty, we naturally end up clustered in informal groups built around consensuses of opinion. Hickey notes that we have a special, peculiarly American beauty, which sweeps up random sensations into one Whitmanesque pile—such as our appreciation of "a chemical sunset and a rookie's jump shot." To Hickey, all of our ordinary conversations in which we exclaim that something is beautiful end up forming links in the "chain of historical responses" to beauty that, he argues, explains "our membership in a happy coalition of citizens who agree on what is beautiful, valuable, and just."

That Hickey happens to respond to peculiar beauties he sees in the work of some contemporary artists while others turn a blind eye toward that same sort of work (or even loathe it) doesn't bother him. He's not interested in the late critic Clement Greenberg's idea that there's a phlogiston-like property called "quality" that's common to all great art, or in being an authority on what specific works of art possess "quality." Greenberg built a career on claiming that kind of authority.

It's worth noting, however, that Hickey is proud of his own record of picking winners in the contemporary art world—of making money from buying and selling the works of artists he admires, like Ed Ruscha and Ken Price-and being among the first to champion such younger contenders as the abstract painter Tim Bavington and the transcendent graffitist Gaijan Fujita.

Hickey is convinced that "art doesn't lend itself to education." He has said, "There is no knowledge there. It's a set of propositions about how things should look, and it doesn't contain any truth." Moreover, he argues, art, like money, has no inherent value. Both are embodiments of a promise—in the case of art, that the experience of beauty can be sustained by owning it. Hickey says there's no point in trying to establish a connection between the quality of a work of art and its reputation in art history. The only thing that can be figured out is its value, determined by an art market driven by desire (not investment)—a place that functions as a mysterious, refined sieve for capturing the best works:

> The give-and-take through which we ascertain the relative value of objects derives from the haggle of the marketplace. At the same time, even though there is always a hard market in objects at the spine of our arguments about beauty, most of the buying and selling is verbal and symbolic, something closer to a civic forum in which objects (often in the possession of others) are elected by free-floating constituencies of citizens as incarnations of their shared pleasures and desires.

Hickey goes on:

> The mystery of the art market is that some people would rather possess an object of marginal utility than the ultra-usable money they exchange for it. This is the mystery of all markets in which taste is transformed into appetite by a nonpecuniary cloud of discourse that surrounds the negotiation. There is always a tipping point at which one's taste for Picasso or freedom or pinot noir becomes a necessity, or at least something one would rather not do without. The exact nature of this "something" is effervescent and indistinct.

In vigorously defending the *virtue* of an art market (again, one driven by desire, as distinct from one driven by investing in art for profit), Hickey praises markets for the way they freely establish value in an area of life where value otherwise would not exist.

His argument amounts to a not-so-stealthy attack on the whole profession of art professors, who, not able to make a living from their art, rely on college employment. It also upsets idealistic young art students

who, understandably, find it hard to accept that their art possesses no intrinsic value. In fact, Hickey's ideas about beauty question the validity of the entire American M.F.A. system, which protects thousands of artists from having to truck with capitalist markets in which the value of their art would be determined by the tug of war between the desires of the buyers and the needs of the sellers.

Hickey once told a friend that he stopped eating Twinkies as soon as the packaging noted that vitamin D had been added. To him, a life marked by nonelitist pleasures containing at least a small dose of self-destruction and risk is more open to acute pleasure than a life lived cautiously. That explains his rapture over the veritable beauty he sees in Robert Mapplethorpe's ruthlessly explicit photographs of what, to most Americans, are shocking homoerotic acts. It also explains his regret at the disappearance of gnarly underground art, now that the art market commodifies everything edgy or different.

Beauty, for Hickey, is a distinctly nonexotic, nonspecialized "pleasant surprise" coming out of nowhere, without the need for validation by experts. Beauty's absence is not ugliness, but rather a void "inform[ing] our recognition of the banal and the grotesque, the existence of which few have the temerity to question." When we encounter something beautiful, Hickey says simply, "we are delighted." But we are also threatened:

> The sudden unexpected harmony of the body, mind and world becomes the occasion for both consolation and anxiety. In that moment, we are at home with ourselves in the incarnate world but no longer in tune with the mass of people who do not respond as we do. We seek out, as a necessity, the constituency of people who do respond, if such a constituency exists.

Hickey's uncomfortable relationship with academe and teaching goes far beyond his conviction that art can't be taught, or his contempt for the many flaccid forms of cultural criticism that have taken root in universities, or even his love of the risk-filled life as opposed to the sinecured one.

To Hickey, the crux of the problem is that once art found a home within academe, the results were predictable: dulled-down artists and art historians for whom everything is just fine. In the same way that Rousseau observed that for moderate people, "it is in their interest that nothing be better," Hickey thinks that the entire supporting apparatus for art and artists—college art departments, museums, galleries, artists' grants—saps the vitality and beauty from art by regulating and controlling it, and worse, by crushing desire.

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Hickey's wholesale condemnation of academe, however, fails to acknowledge that many important contemporary artists whom he himself admires (Ken Price and Bruce Naumann, for example) come out of universities. And though Hickey is one of the most famous outside-the-box professors to have taught in an art department, he's not the only one. The best students have a way of sussing them out and flocking to study with them. More to the point, by studying art within a university, students find an alternative form of patronage from a glitzy, investor-driven art market. They're doing what Leonardo advocated 500 years ago—studying literature, history, philosophy, science, and math, with the goal of lifting their art to something higher than decoration.

Finally, Hickey fails to consider that good (and even great) artists are not always rebels—a point that Margot and Rudolf Wittkower, in their classic study of artistic personalities, *Born Under Saturn* (1963), document in detail.

Nevertheless, his claim that he's never "had any experience of high art that was not somehow confirmed in my experience of ordinary culture—and that did not, to some extent, reform and redeem that,"

resonates with anyone who is enthusiastic about both high and pop culture. While Hickey doesn't fawn over American mass culture, or wallow obliviously in its vulgarity, he clearly thrives on the honesty and street-derived vigor that's born of the vernacular.

Like an elephant that knows how to use its trunk to pluck jewels from the dust, he favors precisely those parts of mass culture that have the capacity to invigorate the "high culture" of art: "No painting is ever sold nor essay written nor band booked nor exhibition scheduled that is not the consequence of previous social interaction, of gossip, body language, fashion dish, and telephone chatter—nothing transpires that does not float upon the ephemeral substrata of 'word of mouth'—on the validation of schmooze."

Dave Hickey is, to put it mildly, saddened to see the small circle of beauty within which he's spent most of his life—contemporary art—decay into a predictable, safe, formulaic money-driven enterprise. His many essays on beauty add up to a valiant attempt to rescue the contemporary art world from self-inflicted self-satisfaction. If he really has abandoned the ship of art criticism, the beauty for which he's battled will be the lesser for it.

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