

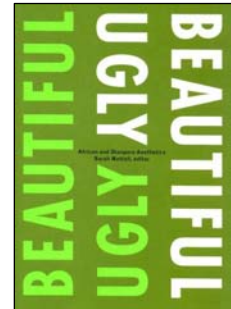
Sarah Nuttall (Ed.), **Beautiful/Ugly: African and Diaspora Aesthetics**, Duke University Press, 2006, 416 pp., \$21.86 (paperback).

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Beautiful/Ugly is undeniably marked by love. It is a love for the often forgotten and neglected aesthetics of contemporary African and African diasporic cultural production that leads contributors, ranging from academics, to artists and fiction writers, to rescue the ugly and render it inherently beautiful, to offer a new way of looking, to find resistance in the conventionally ugly. This intoxication, propelled by lush artwork and a binding more like that of a glossy art album than the average text on theory, while certainly contagious, misses some of the urgency in challenging the discursive binaries of the beautiful and the ugly as well as the essentialism that is an easy outgrowth of celebration.



As noted by the collection's editor, Sarah Nuttall, the essays are all in direct conversation with academia's recent move to revive scholarship on beauty. Specifically, Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty* (1999) proves a recurring target and rightfully so, as her Eurocentric insistence that beauty can be both organic and stable tends to elide contemporary African aesthetics. Patricia Pinho, in her essay on "Afro-Aesthetics of Brazil," sums up Scarry's thesis as arguing that "beauty . . . exist[s] autonomously as a metaphysical entity that emanates from objects, places or people" (p. 285). Reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's exaltation of culture as all "sweetness and light," Scarry, informed by conventions of the Enlightenment, suggests that beauty is perfection, truth and justice all in one. Lest the fixity of this perfection be questioned, for Scarry, "perfection" is a universal morality, producing what Nuttall refers to as "unselving" (p. 14). It is this rendering of beauty and its hard-to-ignore resonances with colonialist projects that each of the collection's writers seeks to dislodge. Consequently, the contemporary voices of post-colonial African aesthetics are articulated within the paradigm of beauty and ugliness, seeking to complicate the familiar leveling — primitivism, exoticism, atavism — that African art is commonly reduced to in the narratives of the European art establishment. Simon Gikandi, in fact, questions this role of Africa in the canon of art history with his rereading of the mythology of Picasso's African influence, in the very first piece of the collection. Echoing Paul Gilroy's suggestion that modernity relies on transatlantic slavery for its very existence, Gikandi says that "the Other is considered to be part of the narrative of modern art yet not central enough to be considered constitutive" (p. 34). In an effort to perform this re-narrativizing, Rodney Place constructs his interview, "Urban Imaging: The *Friche* Waiting to Happen," in terms of constant travel back-and-forth across the Atlantic. He pulls from Texan musicians and "a Catholic Mexican girl across the Rio Grande," (p. 327) from Rome and California, to render the experience of the contemporary African artist in an African urban space. Similar to the way that European modernity does not exist outside of its relationship with Africa, contemporary African aesthetics, it seems, do not exist without the global. "In search of beauty, you have to keep changing your focus — sometimes far, sometimes close — and keep turning your head," says Place (p. 335). The shift in focus, *Beautiful/Ugly* implies, is both discursive and

geographic. It is a fundamental concept on which each of the essays operates, even if the notions of "African" are a bit too easily invoked (Congolese quickly slides into "African," as does Ghanaian, etc.).

Following Place's imperative, each of the essays changes its focus and turns its head, reading beauty into that which Scarry would consider ugly, hinging this reconceptualization on the notion that the beautiful and the ugly exist on an elastic continuum, always imbricated and inflected with culture and geography, with memory and the grammars of need. Rita Barnard's piece, "The Place of Beauty: Reflections on Elaine Scarry and Zakes Mda," begins by asserting that beauty is a "semiotic shifter," that it "has no home" (p. 104). Examining the intersections of the local, the national and the global in Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Barnard concludes that "places of insecurity . . . also produce ways of defining and recognizing the 'beautiful' thing" (p. 121). Dominique Malaquais, for her own part, seizes on the elasticity of beauty and ugliness to discuss Joseph Francis Sumegne's *La Nouvelle Liberté* (2007), a sculpture in Douala made entirely of garbage, an embodiment of resistance and the possibility for social change. "The artist's stated intent," according to Malaquais, "is to show that from nothing — from waste . . . — powerful things can arise" (p. 128). These "powerful things" can be none other than beauty in this context. According to the grammars of resistance, Malaquais suggests, Sumegne's sculpture is, indeed, a manifestation of beauty.

A similar practice can be found in Pippa Stein's "Fresh Stories," which describes young girls in Johannesburg constructing elaborate "fertility dolls" from waste materials. Belying her own political project here, Stein ponders the way how the dolls' beauty is to be regarded: "a beauty that is rendered from the found materials of extreme poverty, what in some people's terms might be thought of as waste, the remains of the everyday, that which cannot be eaten" (p. 168). She reasons that "waste" is a slippery notion (several contributors, in fact, return to *slipperiness*), with the value accorded to resources entirely dependent on culture and place. As emblems of "generative" waste, and therefore beauty, these dolls "reveal . . . the dynamic relationship between creativity, innovation and resources" (p. 180).

Resources are taken up, quite literally, by both Célestin Monga and Françoise Vergés, each of whose essays discuss food practices and the ritual aesthetics of eating. Monga takes a significantly more celebratory stand with regard to African food rituals, focusing his piece entirely on the wedding feast traditions among the wealthy élite in Cameroon. Determined to forge a link between social epicureanism and "the desire for self-affirmation," Monga sometimes forgets that the beauty of self-affirmation among the elite is routed through legacies of French colonialism (specifically, the music and food he describes) (p. 239). Almost anticipating this critique, Vergés stakes her version of beauty in the hybridization of food, suggesting that cooking is "a deeply aesthetic act" (a beautiful one, no doubt), all "about desire" and memory (pp. 250, 255). What she calls the "creolization of food" necessitates a remapping of the "worlds around territories of food and eating, economies of plenty and shortage" (pp. 254, 250).

There is a sense of near urgency in plucking beauty out of post-colonial and transatlantic pain that permeates Nuttall's entire collection of essays. Reflecting on "the history of pain in beauty," Mark Gevisser's intimate photographic archive rehearses a longing for a South Africa that "might have been" (pp. 221, 223). Even with the express purpose of addressing ugliness in her piece "Things Ugly: Ghanaian Popular Painting," Michelle Gilbert manages to redeem ugliness yet again, edging it determinedly toward

the beautiful end of the spectrum. "To understand the aesthetics of ugliness in Ghana," she proposes, "the concept must be broadened . . . to include what is distasteful and disagreeable in areas of the vulgar, obscene and pornographic" (p. 346). That said, like those before her who saw beauty in resistance and utility, Gilbert too finds beauty in art's function. According to her, "the recombination of images, shocking in themselves" leaves the viewer "free to create and recreate meanings" (p. 365).

The project is so urgent, in fact, that Achille Mbembe premises his entire essay about Congolese worlds of sound on the assumption that Theodore Adorno would have considered Congolese music "low art." While Adorno's famous dismissal of jazz certainly lends itself to this assumption, attempting to rescue Congolese sounds from a critic whose élitist musical perspectives (on jazz) have been all but relegated to the ramblings of the figurative uncle in the attic, seems futile.

Beautiful/Ugly asks what beauty looks like in the global context, in the "ugliness of political failure, post-colonial administrative and bureaucratic disfigurement" (p. 27). In light of the contributors' often passionate and deeply personal narratives, interviews, and short stories, the answer seems simple enough: ugliness is beauty; beauty is everything; and everything, especially the conventionally (by European standards) ugly, is beauty. It is a noble and admittedly necessary political position with regard to art history. However, in constantly erring on the side of beauty, whatever manifestation it may take, the arguments reify the very binary of beauty/ugliness that they set out to unseat. Surely, a fluid relationship between ugliness and beauty does not mean that everything is beautiful (or else, that everything is ugly). This is not at all intended to deny the seeming democratization of that fluidity nor is it to insist on distinction, but rather, to suggest that if these binaries are to be shed, the discursive practices and invested sentiments that accompany them must be shed as well. Beauty's uninterrogated reign cannot constitute the default. A rereading of that which is rendered ugly as beautiful constitutes a potentially risky political undertaking. This liberal love affair with all things deemed "ugly" ends in a rereading that privileges beauty instead. But is there no political possibility in the deliberately ugly, in that which knows it will be read as ugly? Is there no traction in a politics of ugliness?

References

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