

In the Name of the Object

/ Tan Yeng Peng

If you have ever enjoyed the services of *A Beauty Centre*, then you would find *Vague Vogue* helpful for your further understanding of how the detoxification and beauty treatment have benefited your body, mind, and spirit at different levels. Otherwise this limited-edition publication, specially issued by *A Beauty Centre*, will embark you on a new and authenticating journey of aesthetic experience and a delicate expedition that promises an absolute state of beauty.

"Beauty" is not only the subjective perceptual experience of our daily life. It is an objective value and belief that permeates all levels of our society and culture, and a classic topic of discussion in the fields of philosophy and art. As for the complex relationship between "art" and artwork as "objects", it was not until the French Dadaist artist Duchamp shocked the world with his readymades that the issue went beyond the scope of aesthetics and philosophy and gradually enters public discussion. Not too long after Duchamp, the American art critic Lucy Lippard proposed the "dematerialization of art object" in 1968 in attempt to legitimize the emerging conceptual art, and Rosalind Krauss expounded the concept of "sculpture in the expanded field" 10 years later from the perspective of minimalist and land art, both of which have far-reaching impact. Although Lippard's and Krauss's theories provide a framework for understanding the new form of art production, they however, obscure the historical definition of art categories and disrupt the certainty of contemporary art. Yet, in the short span of 50 years, contemporary art theory and research have seen a "material turn". Many scholars have begun to think that the so-called "dematerialization" of art is no longer meaningful today, and began to focus instead on the inner relationship between the art object and its materiality. Some scholars believe that this phenomenon is art's antidotal response to the digitalized world, some regard the support of "object" as the artist's refusal to the theorization of art, or the elimination of author-centricity with an emphasis on the material to resist art's over-subjectivization due to its close association with technology.¹ In an era of the new media, the explosion of images and information in the world of internet adds to the already complicated situation: today's art museums are filled with "objects" of all kinds - paintings, sculptures, photos, videos, objects that are mere-objects (Guardrail poles? Signboard? Dehumidifiers? Projectors?), objects that are not-mere-objects (Artists' "readymades"? "Artwork" that looks like supermarket merchandise? Bricks laid by minimalist artist?); and non-objects (Sound art? Projection on a wall or space? Virtual reality? Digital collection?). In the face of all these "things" with different forms and properties, many may no

¹ Martha Rosler et al., "Notes From the Field: Materiality," *The Art Bulletin*, no. 95 (2013): pp. 10-37, <https://doi.org/www.jstor.org/stable/43188793>

longer understand what art exactly is: Are there categories? How do we classify? How to distinguish the mainstream from the marginal? What is considered popular and what outdated? Which standard do we follow? What is beauty? Is beauty important? Who has the final say?

In the past, people demanded that art should be about “truth”, “kindness”, and “beauty”, but the world today is filled with material greed, led by commercial needs, and covered with false beliefs of superficial beauty and taste, would these simple virtues be good enough? How could these qualities be maintained? *A Beauty Centre* was born of such contemporary context as an attempt to provide people with real experiences through exploring beauty and reality in a false world full of fake images (and fake news!). Through various beauty and artistic means, the founder of *A Beauty Centre* deliberately created multiple contradictions between objects and non-objects in his spaces, so that opposing elements negates one another to achieve “detoxification” for the clients. Special effort has been made, on both the perceptual and physical levels, to connect the attention of clients who have come to experience the treatment, while presenting them a series of visual and perceptual questions to ponder. Here, poetic ambiguity is part of the therapy from the beginning, everything they encounter seems paradoxical, they see in front of them beautiful nude statues that are not “beautiful” nor “nude”, they pass by pool of liquid that is hard and dry, but walk into columns of soft rain without getting wet. They come across a table without a stable surface for holding things, while appreciating fashion displays on the walls that are not fashionable. Eventually, they find themselves in a beauty salon that is not a “beauty salon”, while *A Beauty Centre* is an art exhibition that is not “art exhibition”, contemporary art that is not “contemporary art”, sculpture exhibition that is not “sculpture exhibition” – at this moment, you may be reading a magazine that is not a “magazine” ... Amidst these baffling affairs, *A Beauty Centre* aims to become a unique arena where meaning would be able to proliferate freely. Everything seems possible here. As the beauticians and the clients seek answers and solutions together during the process of therapy and healing, audiences, artists, the art objects, the very site of the centre itself, and even this publication all become inter-subjects that enrich one another during the mutual exchange.

In addition to the most relevant business ideas and “beauty concepts” meticulously carved by the founder of *A Beauty Centre*, *Vague Vogue* has also invited important critics in the art industry to further extend and clarify issues related to the definition of beauty, art, and the related mechanisms for the audiences.

First, we have “The Beautiful and Damned” written specially for *A Beauty Centre* by the late British art critic and curator John Calcutt (1951-2018). From the start, the author highlights in the brief preface the rich and complicated relationship between art and its viewers, and highlights the contradiction between the habitual orientation towards the objective in art writings and the

subjective experience in actual art viewing. In view of this, Calcutt avoided academic logic deliberately and emphasized instead on experimentation and imagination in his writing. While fictional approach – a frequent technique in his recent writings – was employed, he consciously adopted the free structure of *A Beauty Center* so as not to assume a preset position. The various elements in the text – from the characters chosen, things mentioned, plots designed, time and space conceived to the fonts, punctuation marks, and sentences formatted, the writing is full of imagery that relates to the theme closely. There is also an interesting range of spectacles involved, such as the apple of the Garden of Eden, Helen in Troy, Mount Fuji seen from the study room, the supermodels and photographers in the studio, the Apple computers in the beauty salon, and the virtual world of the future. The strong sense of visuals seems to respond to the summon of *A Beauty Centre*. On the other hand, the deliberate montage used subtly represents and echoes the instability and multi-faceted nature of the definition of "beauty" as a subject here. In the section of "In the Beauty Salon" which alludes to the world today, Calcutt ingeniously embedded Apple's advertising phrases into the scholarly discussions of culture by using the "cut and paste" method. In so doing, he insinuates the marketing of "beauty" in the commercial world while reflecting on the "copy-paste syndrome" of the online world in the age of Google. At the same time, this also brings the plot of the article to come conceptually in sync with *A Beauty Centre's* treatment plans. In the end, both works share the same belief that, "... the very idea of beauty is dynamic, changing, and in need of re-conceptualizing in our age of personal computers, digital technology, mobile phones, virtual reality and mass consumerism."

Next, we have "Sculpture Cast as Satire: Misgivings on the Quest for Beauty" written by Singaporean artist and curator Susie Lingham. The article makes detailed account and careful analysis of *A Beauty Centre's* founding philosophy, its therapy components, and the objects and materials used in the setting up of the centre. Lingham begins with the theme of *A Beauty Centre* and discusses the close links between beauty, sculpture, art, and power, before moving on to an in-depth exploration of possible meanings and intentions behind the making of *A Beauty Centre* as an "Art and Beauty Salon". In her report of the "business background" of the founder Yeo Chee Kiong, she makes important observations such as the impact Yeo's foundation in and love for sculpture making have on his current practice, as she takes note of the interesting tension and negotiation between form and formlessness in Yeo's attempt to express "natural phenomenon" versus "artificial beauty". For Lingham, in addition to having "straddle inherited Baroque and Rococo aesthetics", there is also "a didactic aesthetics of the absurd at play" in *A Beauty Centre*. As Yeo makes reflection on the age of selfie where the obsession with superficial beauty and our own body-image is norm, Lingham points out that the real irony here is perhaps the very inquiry itself into the subject of beauty. Furthermore, *A Beauty Centre* is also being described as a showcase that "thrums with schizophrenic incongruence" on the one hand, while revealing Taoist ideas that is buried in the mind of the artist. These keen remarks further revealed the

ambivalence and conflict between the artist's male identity and the subject of taste and female beauty. In this investigation, Lingham has undoubtedly added an important dimension in revealing the works of the subconscious in Yeo's creative journey.

Following Lingham's clever texts is an excerpt from the public talk "Eye Covered: In the Name of Beauty" in the "Juming Art Forum" series, "*A Beauty Centre* in Jinshan – Mimicry: Art Unmasked". The theme is a rather rare one in art forums, and included here is a conversation between two of the panelists, the founder of *A Beauty Centre* Yeo Chee Kiong and well-known Taiwanese art historian Pai Shih-Ming, where the two of them discusses the "survival" and "strategy" of the art world while exploring how the subjects of "beauty", "art", "artist", "culture", "society" and "politics" are at the same time against and interdependent of one another. From rather intriguing perspectives such as the consideration of the mimicry behavior in the biological world, strategies of deception (covering the eyes) in fashion businesses, and the social function of the museum spaces, they provide insights on the processes where various social mechanisms and art institutions might negotiate, adapt, and integrate with one another. In Yeo's part, he emphasizes the role of the artist as a questioner, and touches on the thorny issue of the place of the artist as the "restless" and "rebellious" one in the face of the mainstream system. He is also concerned about the necessity of the presence of "beauty" in contemporary times, the "survival" of art and artists in society, and issues in the construction of aesthetic framework and artistic strategies. For Pai, he proposes that in the contemporary context where "the author is dead," the issues worth noting includes the identity simulation between the artist and the audience, the increasingly complex relationship between artist, artwork, and the art space, the changing definition of art, the impact of cultural background on the public's interpretation of the work, and the socialization of art, etc. Ultimately, he reflects on what it means for cultural producers to work "in the name of beauty", and points out aptly that it is worthwhile for us to consider the difference between "beauty" in religion and in philosophy. He even uses the rather interesting concept of the "art hormone" to describe how artists often "cover the eyes" and perform "mimicry" in different situations to achieve their social roles.

The final article is "The Goddess Muse in *A Beauty Centre*" written by renowned Taiwanese art critic Kao Chien-Hui. Kao's essay is directed toward the international art ecosystem and addresses issues such as the commercial operation and institutional hegemony in what she called "the contemporary art production line". Her precise and sharp analysis brings deep reflections and reminders to the problematic ecological-environment of the contemporary art world. In fact, the title of this writing was originally "Who Killed the Art Museum?" first written in the 1990s. It was the topic of a symposium that was later collected in the book *Rebellion in Silhouette* published in 2008. Interestingly, Yeo's inquiry into the subject of the institution in *A Beauty Centre* actually began around 2007 with the art project *A Day Without A Tree* exhibited at

the National Museum of Singapore. It was with this event that he began employing the theme of "beauty" to establish discussions on the issue of the institution from various angles. While Kao and Yeo were living in entirely different places at that time – one in Chicago in the west and one in Singapore in Southeast Asia – and do not know each other, the issues and phenomena that they were targeting are apparently linked and resonates with each other over the same chronological axis. As a conscientious critic, Kao pin points various key issues and describes the dilemma of the art museums as a public space in the face of changes pertaining to elements such as time, geography, policy, and culture, etc. To name a few, the predicaments include: coping with competitions with other institutions in terms of their strength in soft-power ("software" such as the museums' collection) and hard-power ("hardware" such as the museum architecture as the main attraction); the commercial exercise of "Blockbuster Shows" and "Theme Park" under the pressure of visitor "headcounts" for economical consideration; and the blurring of the museum's position and function as a cultural institution in its struggle between populist views and elitist claims. Without planning, these issues Kao describes finds intriguing visual analogies with imagery in Yeo's *A Beauty Centre*. For example, the "careful: slippery!" warning sign besides the pink pool, the secret meeting by the nine shadows conducted in the digital screens to discuss "beauty", and the implausible beauty treatment manuals, all seems to correspond directly with Kao's comments, while the two interestingly forms an intertextual relationship. Here, there appear to be a kind of overlap and mutual verification between art criticism and artistic creation. As the two of them crosses each other's path, Kao and Yeo seem to be asking one question in unison: when the Goddess Muse enters *A Beauty Centre*, will "beauty" find its justification?

A Beauty Centre was first established in Singapore and later in Taiwan, with the special publication *Vague Vogue* available now that makes the oeuvre complete – it took Yeo a total of nearly ten years for all these. By bringing together sculptural objects, beauty and detoxifying treatment system, and art reading in alliance, he hopes to re-examine our relationship with "beauty", "art", and "artwork" through the scopes of personal creation, contemporary art mechanism, and commercial business model. As a "beauty salon" run by an artist, the value of *A Beauty Centre* lies in the fact that it is not only about the "personal expression" of the artist, but also the "clients'" individual subjectivity and experience. Here, the intermediary between the two may be the thing we have been calling "object". At this point, if we put aside aesthetic theory and consider the anthropologist Alfred Gell's theory on art's agency, then all objects we have created in our lives, including artworks, are the "agents" of society. In Gell's study of artworks, his interest lies not in what they "represent" but in what was "activated". Gell believes that there is a close relationship between mind, matter, and personhood, and their activity is mediated through different "indexes" - i.e., "distributed objects".² Under Husserl's influence, he studied the

² Liana Chua and Mark Elliott, *Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), p.4

relationship between time, change, and creativity, and believed that the individual works of the artist always retain something from earlier works or possess traces that are "anticipated". The artist's work is therefore composed of retention and protention of consciousness, while the structure of art history reveals the externalization and collectivization of cognitive processes. For him, the artistic "style" is related to a network of relationships, and the understanding of artworks must involve the study of the artist's overall works (the oeuvre) rather than interpreting it as a singular entity such as that in traditional art history. Therefore, artistic objects are the superimposition of different "distributed objects", and the artist's consciousness as the "agent" is not only "accessible to people", but the artist themselves has become this object and plays different roles in different time and space through numerous ways.³

In this case, *A Beauty Centre* is then a large palimpsest of Yeo's artistic career, not only traces of his individual works – both lucid and faint ones – are inscribed and have appeared over different periods of time, it is also ready to be superimposed with new marks in the future. We could therefore easily explore Yeo's artistic trajectory through a visit to *A Beauty Centre*. There, he has quietly slip across the boundary of the field of sculpture while incessantly trying to articulate his identity as a sculptor through the rendition of material and physical objects. Here, "tradition" and "sculpture" did not disappear, they are simply transformed. If we summarize *A Beauty Centre* as an artist's quest about object, medium and materiality, aesthetics and artistic categories, and issues about the institutions, then perhaps our concerned should not be whether the museum has the right to decide what is "beauty", nor whether the artist could still determine the meaning of their works, but what is it that the art object could do?

If *A Beauty Centre* is indeed about making quests, *Vague Vogue* would be the doorways, stopping places, and sceneries on your journey to the answers.

³ Chua and Elliott, p.1-24, Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007)