

HYPERION

On the Future of Aesthetics

Vol. XIII, No. 1 (November 2020)

ANNIE LE BRUN

MAURICE BLANCHOT

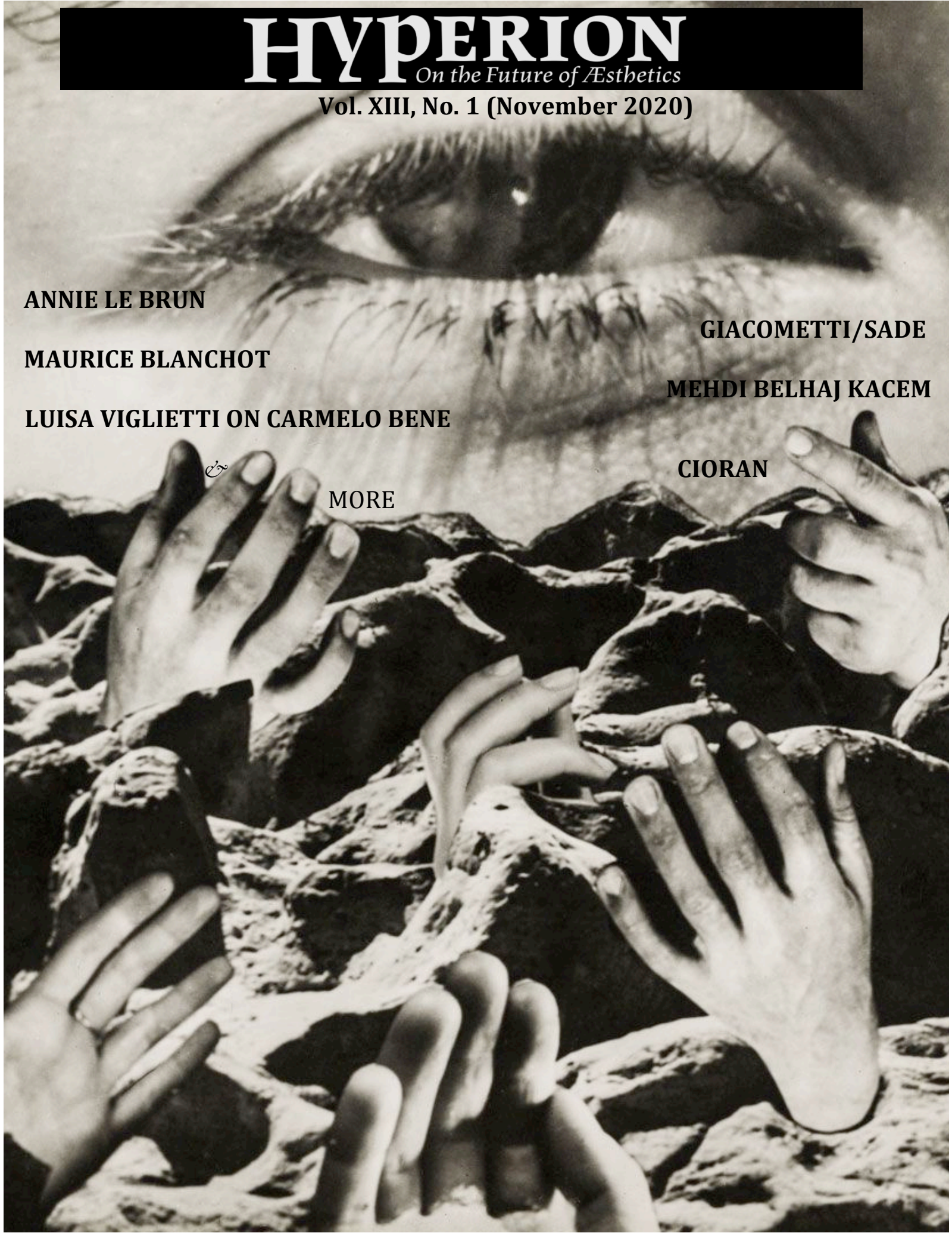
LUISA VIGLIETTI ON CARMELO BENE

GIACOMETTI/SADE

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HYPERION

On the Future of Æsthetics



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Quotes

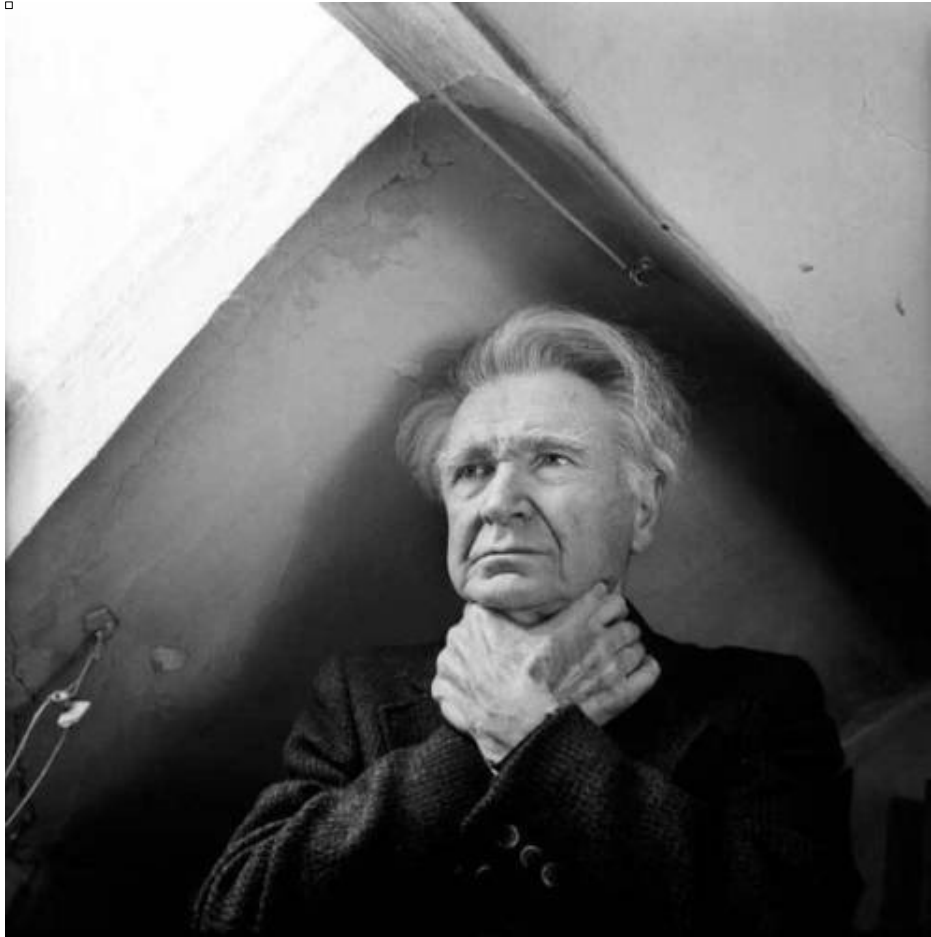
Only the book matters, such as it is, far from genres, outside of categories — prose, poetry, novel, testimony — under which it refuses to be classed, and to which it denies the ability to assign its place and determine its form. A book no longer belongs to a genre; every book belongs to literature alone, as if literature possessed beforehand, in their generality, the secrets and formulae that alone allow what is written to assume the reality of a book. It seems as if genres have vanished, and literature alone asserted itself, gleamed solitary in the mysterious clarity that it propagates, and which each literary creation reflects by multiplying it — as if there were, in short, an “essence” of literature. But the essence of literature is precisely to escape any essential determination, any assertion that stabilizes it or even realizes it: it is never already there; it always has to be rediscovered or reinvented.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*

Writing as the question of writing, a question that bears writing that bears the question, no longer allows you this relation to being — understood first as tradition, order, certainty, truth, all forms of rootedness — which one day you received from worlds past, a domain that you were called to administer the better to strengthen your “Ego,” even though it had as it were cracked open, the day the sky opened onto its emptiness.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*

□



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Mostra "Carmelo Bene, la voce e il fenomeno/Suoni e visioni dall'archivio" a cura di Luisa Viglietti. Casa dei Teatri, Villino Corsini, Villa Doria Pamphilj, Roma, 28 aprile 26 giugno 2005. Fotografie di Francesca Rachele Oppedisano.

HYPERION

On the Future of Æsthetics

Extract from

PRICELESS

Beauty, Ugliness, & Politics

□

Annie
LE BRUN



Ce qui n'a pas de prix

les essais
Stock

BY ANNIE LE BRUN

Translated by Jocelyne Geneviève Barque
and John Galbraith Simmons

Today the time has come when human and natural catastrophes combine to obliterate the future. And the premier consequence of such an amalgam is that, in hoping to somehow contain the damage, both real and symbolic, we fail to look beyond it and see the abyss toward which we seem inevitably headed.

Continuous acceleration of events makes it ever more difficult to parse cause and effect. “Reality overload,” as I described it some eighteen years ago as a consequence of commercialization run amok, is inseparable from the “information superhighway” with its surfeit of things, glut and sprawl of images, and countervailing signs.¹ The result is an enormous mass of total insignificance that invades, occupies, and aggregates, with its own excess operating as a form of censorship.

The fact is that too much reality soon creates an unmanageable overabundance. In point of fact, in addition to nuclear, chemical, and organic waste, and detritus from every sort of mass production, there must now be added, amidst the vast discharge, the inordinate flood of beliefs, laws and ideas set adrift like carcasses and empty shells. If there’s one clear characteristic of the 21st century thus far, it’s that such things are without substance. Yet we have no idea how to process or think about them, much less get rid of them.

Disfigurement and defilement of the world, as a result, continues unabated but outside conscious awareness. Beyond various spectacular vexations, on every continent we now find that space is brutalized. The warp and weave of life is misshapen and distorted, massively yet insidiously afflicting our own mental landscapes.

Whether we like it or not, the situation holds much political significance. Consider that vibrant, genuine beauty, although perhaps impossible to define, can nonetheless shine blazing light upon the world, upending and even remaking it. Note too that the central totalitarian regimes of the 20th century hunted down works of art that were powered by that luminosity, aiming to impose a palpable sense of terror. Nazi “art” and Stalinist socialist realism shared an essentially interchangeable outlook. Both employed moralistic kitsch to affirm the supposed immorality of “degenerate” art and they also called upon the human body to bear false witness

¹ Annie Le Brun, *Reality Overload* (2014).

in favor of their ideological lies. With few exceptions, even social revolutionaries paid scant attention to the family resemblance between these two brands of disaster and were concerned still less by their repercussions. All of which helps explain why, since the end of the Second World War, ugliness has enjoyed an open road.

More than ever, over the past twenty years, artistic productions (plastic and performing arts alike) have aided and abetted this process of uglification. Supported and sponsored, often at great cost, many of them often bear the dubious pretense of being ever more shocking and subversive; but, in fact, they simply reveal ongoing and thorough abasement. And as concurrent demonstration of such false consciousness, there also arises the production of counterfeit beauty designed to serve commercial aesthetics that some would like to see as the mark of “artistic capitalism.”²

Apparently contradictory circumstances like this reveal, by way of increasing trivialization, a process of neutralization. It operates with the aim of bringing about acceptance of all things (and their opposites) while consistently eradicating any trace of negative thinking. It would be too simple to think, following Stendhal, that “beauty is nothing but the promise of happiness” and ugliness the result of misfortune.³ To hold such a belief today runs the risk of being blind to the new aesthetic-ization of the world, which most people tend to welcome but which, in fact, does nothing but devastate and extort society from top to bottom, inducing unprecedented desensitization. The production of art shows, performances and installations in theaters, museums, arts centers and foundations ends by producing cynicism that goes hand-in-hand with indifference.

The consequence of all this is a brazen and cynical order of denial. It can only end by calling into question all these various forms of representation that devalue one another by way of an imploding chain-reaction. The result is total disillusion. So much so that people are gradually stripped of any sensitive relationship to the world and in the end find themselves lonely and deprived. In the hope of escaping such isolation, there arises a sense of false community astride a new kind of servitude that produces fortunes

² Gilles Lipovetsky et Jean Serroy, *L'Esthétisation du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013) 34.

³ Stendhal, *Love* (Penguin Classics) ch. 17.

for “social media.” Can it possibly be that, to escape exclusion, we should all be by this means tamed and domesticated?

Something is abroad today that is almost impossible for people to grasp — not so much uncertainty in facing the present and future but, rather, the sensation of dreams slipping away. It’s as though we no longer have any way to express or even think about the deepening chasm between our lived experience and the language to articulate it — and this to such an extent that no social critique, rigorous though it might be, can provide more than background noise or offer any relief except, for those who share it, a clear conscience. With crisis the constant topic of debate, the various critical approaches seem to do nothing but play into the hands of domination. Those who offer them, although happy to oblige, appear unaware of the role they play. The more they talk, the less they share the same language. As a result, instead of an emergent critique of crisis, we observe a crisis of criticism.

How might reflection on the current state of beauty, and the threats it faces, permit escape from this dispiriting situation? Consider that even if no one knows how to define it, each of us at some time has encountered beauty’s power to astonish and overwhelm, to inject meaning where previously there seemed to be none. Beauty, just as lightning strikes, will not countenance captivity and for that very reason can’t be simply lost or forgotten in consequence of events. Recall Rimbaud, famously, at the opening of *A Season in Hell*: “One evening I sat Beauty on my knees — And I found her bitter — And I reviled her.”⁴ Reading those lines, you must wonder how to square them with the seemingly contradictory conclusion, at the end of this same poem of self-discovery: “At last I know how to salute beauty.”

What transpired between April and August 1873, the period during which Rimbaud composed his famous “Season in Hell”? The question long bothered me — until now. With the current situation so clearly worsening, I’ve come to wonder whether Rimbaud’s sudden change of heart during the darkest of times could not provide for us today a sort of recourse, even remedy. For it was as if, after having taken every risk to steer clear of beauty’s too-well-

⁴ Arthur Rimbaud, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009) *passim*.

trodden paths, Rimbaud suddenly saw how there is invariably beauty that is *other* — a beauty that, like the kind of love he imagined, is always there to be reinvented. He discerned it, as he wrote, in “silly paintings, street performance, raucous vulgarity, dirty books, childish ditties” not to forget “the felicity of beasts” and “all the eruptions and disasters” through which, in his madness, he rode as though upon cresting waves. So in the end he pays tribute to beauty because he discovers it not to be something so plural as it is singular and uncapitalized; and his genius was to grasp beauty in all its surging violence, to run ahead of it across the “deserts of love” and thrust himself upon it beneath a “clear sky gone dark.” He could discover it even when he could no longer recognize himself — at the same time affirming “I am other.” He opened beauty’s unique sovereignty to all.

We owe a further debt to Rimbaud: he underscored the importance for everybody “to find place and precept” and points to its urgency at the very moment when he denounces, by the savage truth of his vision and a century and a half in advance of what we’re faced with today, “our economic horrors” and “vision by numbers” of the universe arising therefrom to sell “bodies without price, outside any race, any world, any sex, seed, or stock!” Which goes on to sell, too, “the voices and immense and unquestionable riches,” of that which can never be sold.

In fact, considering all that makes us heirs to France’s unsavory and repugnant Second Empire — financial speculation, colonization, plunder — there’s nothing Rimbaud didn’t cast into the fire by his refusal. So much so that he saw take shape, amidst those flames, the surprising beauty of possibility. Unpredictable and indefinable, this beauty shines forth to instill itself within the void, creating room for the inrush of imagination. Inseparable from the revolt that gives birth to it, the imagination returns time and again to give birth to freedom beyond hope. What Rimbaud said, dreamed, and revealed continues, more than a century later, to resonate with the young who’ve not yet given up or given in. Rimbaud was said to be the first to have risked everything to “change life.” It’s compelled me to summon him now, confronted with the sinister onset of this century — even though he seems to have been pointedly neglected. But we should not forget him or others like him who, in spite of every

obstacle, manage to extract, as Pierre Reverdy suggested, “the source from the rock.”⁵ Or that exemplary success can persuade us, with Ignaz Troxler, that “there exists another world but it’s got to be found in the one we’ve got.”⁶

There’s no better justification needed to refuse the accepted order of things than the eruption of the possible and the beauty that might thereby emerge. From George Orwell’s *1984*: “Almost as swiftly as he had imagined it, she had torn her clothes off, and when she flung them aside it was with that same magnificent gesture by which a whole civilization seemed to be annihilated.”

Beauty enmeshed with poetry, with something that is “nothing from nowhere,” as Reverdy puts it and “the manifestation of the irrepressible human desire to be free.” Osip Mandelstam paid with his life for just such certainty. He wrote that people must have poetry “To keep them forever awake / And bathe them in the bright-haired wave of its breath.”⁷

Examples of such an exalted mad quest for what’s *priceless* could be readily multiplied. Few among those who sought it ever abandoned their desire for it, set against the flickering light of an eternal present. The surge of attendant beauty, with its unpredictable horizons, continually disturbs the entrenched powers because it is exactly the thing they want to destroy and take away from us, down to the very memory of it.

I can only wonder how long we can afford to remain indifferent and to what extent we contribute to it, if only by inattention. How long shall we ignore the establishment of a new kind of servitude if not thorough corruption and dissolution?

⁵ *Cette émotion appelée poésie: Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974) 28.

⁶ The Swiss philosopher (1780–1866) Troxler was a student of Schelling and Hegel, and this citation has been attributed to Yeats, Rilke, and especially, to Paul Eluard.

⁷ Osip Mandelstam, *Selected Poems* (NY: New York Review Books, 2004).