

## On Beauty, Science, and Nature

At the start of the twenty-first century, the most discussed topic in photography was the future of computer-manipulated images, and the least considered subject was the outlook for beauty. Throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century, beauty was held accountable for photography's lapses and misdeeds, especially in the area of social concern. In his enduringly influential essay, "On the invention of photographic meaning' (1975), photographer-critic Allan Sekula savaged art for art's sake, writing that "the ills of photography are the ills of aestheticism," and that "aestheticism must be superseded, in its entirety, for a meaningful art, of any sort, to emerge."1 Critic Hal Foster concurred in his popular anthology The Anti-Aesthetic (1983), whose title was drawn from a phrase fashioned in Walter Benjamin's authoritative essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"2 (see pp. 269-70, 305-6). Foster questioned whether the aesthetic was now a threadbare illusion.3 Time and again, beauty was sent packing to the cobwebbed attic of outmoded ideas.

Expunged from much of contemporary art practice and academic concern, beauty acquired the allure of the forbidden, especially for undergraduates, whose academic study of the arts and humanities had evolved into a long interrogation of received ideas and disguised social contexts. The seductiveness of banished beauty propelled American critic Dave Hickey's The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty (1993) into an underground book on campus, even though Hickey shied away from a direct discussion of beauty to focus on the psychological experience of visual pleasure and repulsion. For this advocacy, Hickey received a prestigious MacArthur Foundation "genius" award in 2001. The notion of beauty as transgressive also launched the careers of French collaborators Pierre et Gilles, who have been making sensuous, often homoerotic photographs since the mid-1970s (Fig. 8.1).

In addition, a few American and European galleries cautiously made beauty the subject of exhibitions. At the Hirshhorn Museum, part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., curators Neal Benezra and Olga M. Viso put together a 1991 exhibition called Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century. Realizing that they could not escape the shadow of

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IBTH COTTINGHAM,
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Digitally constructed
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## Photography, A Cultural History

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Ronald Feldman Fine Arts 31 Mercer Street New York, New York 10013 USA ph: 212 226 3232 fax: 212 941 1536 www.feldmangallery.com

Sales Inquiries: martina@feldmangallery.com marco@feldmangallery.com

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