

De Kapberg, January 17, 2002

Dear Adam,

You asked me in your last letter if there is a fundamental difference in aesthetic meaning between the Sublime and the Beautiful. And you wondered why the remark of the German composer Karl Heinz Stockhausen about the destruction of the World Trade Center as the greatest work of art in the cosmos, has aroused so much discussion.

I think that the two questions are related. But before I can clarify my idea, we have to define the meaning of the words sublime and beautiful, because both words carry a long tradition with them. You once wondered, whether the word love today still means the same as in the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, not to speak about the other ancient cultures, or that its meaning had totally changed. I remember that your answer was quite ambivalent. You wished that the experience of love would be timeless, but you were not sure if your idea of love as a universal phenomenon was not a joke.

Already Greek philosophers made a distinction between the beautiful, as being pleasant, harmonious, proportional, natural and so on, and the sublime as the greatest, the highest, most intense aesthetic experience. Plato describes four forms and stages of beauty – the beauty of the body; moral beauty; intellectual beauty and absolute beauty. Absolute beauty is not longer a particular, concrete form but the inner realisation of the source of all the beauty there is. He calls this source the Idea of Beauty. Next to this source of the beautiful, there is the source / Idea of Truth and the source / Idea of Goodness. Beauty and Truth merge into Goodness; the three into the One. Whether the One of Plato could be compared with the Void of the Taoists or the Emptiness of the Buddhist, we might discuss another time.

The notion of the sublime covers various meanings. It is not only the highest stage of the beautiful both in the philosophy of Plato, as well as in the Christian, classicist and Moslem concept of the absolute beauty of God, but it refers also to the intensity of a tragic experience, for example in a Greek tragedy as Oedipus Rex or in Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Longinus, an unknown author in the first century C.E., defines the sublime in *Peri hupsous* with the words: All that is really great, will not be exhausted by contemplation, and it is difficult, no, even impossible to offer resistance to it. The memory of it is strong and nearly ineffaceable.

This definition expresses what happened to all who saw the first TV-images of

the attack on the WTC. This can't be true, but it is true! Such an intense emotion belongs not to the order of the beautiful in the traditional sense of the word, but to the sublime. Since ancient times, the sublime has a Janus face. It might refer to the highest degree of beauty, which cannot be expressed in any form. This point of view is expressed in the interdiction of any effigy of Jahveh, God or Allah in Judaism, Protestant Christianity or Islam. But it can also refer to the most intense experiences we are able to imagine in real life and in the arts. Experiences with such an intensity that they surpass the frames of our culture-bound perceptions, such as Medea of Euripides, the Inferno of Dante, Towering Inferno, or...911, where the distinction between virtual reality and real reality faded away on the TV screens. The sublime as overwhelming horror and the sublime as the fascinating, frightening mystery of the holy, are somehow related to each other. They share with each other the desire of the infinite, of boundlessness. The infinite, the boundlessness do not know any aesthetic or ethical rule.

But while the sublime in the Platonic, Christian and classicist tradition may be defined as the all surpassing degree of natural beauty, the sublime of the Greek Medea or September 11, 2001 has a different origin. It unveils the dark side of life, the abyss of the human heart. The sublime raises questions which belong equally to ethics and ontology as to aesthetics. It raises the spectre of the ugly, of evil. In the experience of the sublime, we are facing non-being; we are facing death. That's the heart of the matter. While in the experience of beauty, we are perceiving life, specific identities, elementary forms, desires and love.

Since ancient times, homo erectus has shown an ambivalent relation to death. Death evokes fear but it exerts also a certain attraction. We find their simultaneous expression in the black Hindu Goddess Kali. Kali, seated on the erect penis of a white man in horizontal position, with many skulls around her neck, holds a sword in her right hand, ready to kill the man. She is the symbol of life-giver and life-taker. She embodies the two necessary tendencies of all organic life, if not of all matter, viz. the centripetal energies, and the centrifugal energies. Good health is the outcome of the right balance between these tendencies.

Together the two tendencies take care of the necessary dynamics of our metabolism. We call it respectively anabolism and catabolism. They build up and release the energy for all vital processes.

On the psychological level, we speak about Eros and Thanatos. Eros symbolises life, love and lust, and embodies as such the centre-oriented desires; thanatos symbolises death, transgression or negation of the own identity, and embodies the centrifugal desires. A Zen master expressed the intrinsic relationship between Eros and Thanatos in the following statement: where there is a beginning, there is an end. Or in the words of Goethe: Alles was entsteht, ist wert

zum Grunde zu gehen / Everything that comes into being, is worthy to go down. These are ontological statements in the sense that they indicate that any form, any identity, human or otherwise, will transform into something else. We can not even define what the word 'else' means...so profound is our ignorance. But what we do know, from experience and insight, is the permanent transformation of our existence, i.e. our identity, if there is anything like that at all. Because the ongoing loss of memory is identical to loss of identity.

I want to come back, dear Adam, to your question about the difference between the sublime and the beautiful, and why the horrible event of 911 might be called 'sublime'. If we connect the principles of the sublime and the beautiful with the Death-principle and with the Eros-principle, we have to realise that we connect the level of the aesthetic perception with a biological and a psychological perspective. This means: I am looking at you, while you are looking at me. What do we see? Aesthetics, a body, a mind, a cad-cam system? Probably all at the same time. So, let's stick to an elementary point of view. We see everything at the same time, but we are unable to grasp intellectually the totality of our existence. In order to understand the working of the various tendencies, we have mapped out a series of concepts, including the sublime and the beautiful. Do these concepts have an autonomous status? Logically, more or less; ontologically, not at all. That is the issue. We are confronted with a dualistic vision on our existence, while that existence itself consists of a dynamic equilibrium between complementary and yet opposite tendencies.

Edmund Burke wrote in the middle of the 18th century about the sublime and the beautiful, defining the sublime as a feeling of great intensity, including even the experience of pain into the notion of the sublime, and separating it from the notion of beauty. A few decades later, Kant did the same, but on the level of reason versus the delight of the senses. Although great romanticists, like Schiller, Herder, Lessing were trying to bridge the gap between the domains of the sublime and the beautiful, it was too late. The abyss between the classic mind and the romantic mind in our bourgeois culture was already too deep to unite the principles of the sublime and the beautiful. This divorce manifests itself today in many domains, on which I hope to commend another time, in another letter. Without a dramatic divorce between the classic and the romantic mind in our culture, the aesthetic perception would have shown different faces. I use the word dramatic, because the marxist and fascist ideologies in the 20th century are the bastard heirs of the Enlightenment and the Romantic syndrome.

Visual artists are searching for a renewal of the perception, all the time. The sublime is haunting their spirit. Everyone wants to break through the existing

frames of perception and experience, perhaps until 911. When the virtual destruction of a skyscraper in *Towering Inferno* became a real destruction on September 11, the ethical dimension entered the scene of the sublime. I write 'sublime', because the overall design of the attack, the long standing preparation, the minimal means, the self control, the suicide, the political agenda, the natural beauty of the planes, the buildings and the blue sky, were all elements in an act that negated any limit, any border. It manifested the sublime, without any relation to Eros. That is, I think, what Stockhausen meant to say. Reality surpassed the opera by all possible means.

When Eros leaves the scene, there is only the destruction by Thanatos. But without Thanatos, Eros becomes sterile. Art can only be art through a subtle interplay between the two opposite tendencies. The beauty of a haiku or a dance is due to the presence of the sublime manifesting itself in the exquisite experience of the passage of time. The Sublime is Time as Destroyer.

Beauty can only come into being when she accepts borders, when she enters a form. The Sublime has to break through boundaries. It blows up forms. In this way I can show that a radical, permanent divorce between the two principles is fatal for the arts and human life.

However, if everything would be in harmony, everything would turn into stone. A new perspective for the arts arises from a dynamic balance between the sublime and the beautiful. Beauty looks for form. The Sublime breaks into the domain of Beauty – and gives it life.

Dear Adam, I wish you all the best,

Fons Elders

August 8, 2002

Dear Adam,

I promised you to write, when I thought to have a glimpse of an insight into one of your many questions. Such an insight happens to occur sometimes during a dream.

Last night I dreamt many dreams, varying in image, theme and depth. One dream had to do with a house that C. and I would buy. The basement of the house was a bathroom, with an opening to the sea...one had only to walk through an opening to step upon the sand into the waves. The price of the basement was not included in the price of the house, and quite expensive: something as \$ 300.000 US. There was not far away another bathroom, also for sale which could be reached independently of the house that was for sale. I liked the bathroom under the house more than the other one. I proposed to buy the house, mentioning to C. that we did not have to buy the bathroom, because there was no entrance, except from the seaside.

The sea lives in me, because of the huge lake in front of my house. With good weather I climb the dike, usually barefoot, to swim and to dance in the lake, with no one around, except some white swans and white sails. Only water and silence.

I tell you this dream, because the dream has been helpful, I guess, to realise something about dying in another dream last night. While dying, I saw that the dying person left the place, the body, the living matter that he was, without leaving a trace. Nothing was there anymore. Suddenly I understood that it is stupid to talk about death because it is nothing. Death is absence. Death is only present in the head of the survivors, not in the mind of the person who has passed away. The insight about the non-existence of death had the form of a bright flash. Something left the deceased person to go on an unknown journey.

The dream is in tune with the insights of the great traditions, such as animism, taoism, buddhism and hinduism. A few weeks ago, I read again the various contributions in *On Life and Death* that I published in the nineties. I read the articles again because I had to lecture in the International School of Philosophy in Leusden on the theme of dying and death.

The ideas of the audience were moving between the poles, with on the one hand the modern classic materialistic view that death is death, meaning that absolute nothing survives or leaves the person that just died; and on the other hand the

millennia-old notion that the dying person is going back into space, into the fields of energies, from where all life is coming.

I replied to the remark of a physician who defended the materialistic view by pointing out how all the cells were dying, that this theory about death was not going to die with him. And that this theory was part of his mental outfit. I argued that his statement could bear the stamp of immortality, because its truth was not dependent on him. This raises the question, so I said, how it is possible that you utter a true and therefore immortal statement, while you are only mortal. While I spoke my sentences, trying to shatter the so-called evidence in his remarks, I saw him blinking. He did not know how to interpret my response.

If Karl Popper would have been among the audience, he would have smiled. His answer would have been that the theory, true or false, belongs to world three, while the dying person or at least what is dying, belongs to world one, and our emotions about the dying person to world two. Popper's distinction between the three worlds is helpful, but leaves us nevertheless with the remaining question, how the relationship between the three worlds can be understood. Or, as I wrote a week ago in *The Creative Energy of Zero*, an introduction to an exhibition of F.I. in a New York Gallery:

Zero stands for the creative nothingness, knowing that it does not belong to the world of phenomena but that it represents the emptiness, the transition of the phenomena. Zero facilitates the transition of a mathematical minus quantity to a mathematical plus; it allows us to think about death; about a deficit on our bank account; about the fragrance of the ephemeral; about the illusion of stability. Zero is the hidden source of the notion of infinity, because it destroys every countable number. Without Zero, the notion of truth could not come into existence, because truth as opposed to a lie depends on the human capacity to think in opposite terms. Only the concept of Zero allows us to make the transgression of one domain into another, to imagine another world than the one, in which we exist.

There were more dreams last night, but writing about one causes the other ones to fade away. This phenomenon raises some questions about the simultaneous existence of feelings, images and ideas, and about the relational essence of ideas and emotions. One leads inescapably to another one. There are no independent, autonomous worlds, separate from whatever exists.

All the best,

Fons Elders

La Source, St. Jean de Valeriscle

Dear Adam,

I feel the urge to write you about Glamour and Apathy, in order to stimulate a process of thoughts between us. Only by an exchange of ideas, a good book will arise.

You expressed in our last phone call your fascination - what follows are my words - about the rise and fall of women who, being a model, found themselves during some time in the centre of a world that aspires for the Sublime. Their inescapable fate - similar to a ballet-dancer - is to be excluded, gradually or suddenly, from that world of Glamour with all the consequences that such a process implies.

Your fascination for the theme is psychologically congenial with experiences of the manic-depressive syndrome...glamour and apathy belong to a manic and depressive world of experiences.

I see, however, yet another dimension in your fascination for glamour and apathy that first of all is a visual phenomenon, and therefore fascinates you as visual artist and photographer. This other dimension hides itself behind the interaction of the manic and the depressive tendencies, these forms of time and psychic movements that suppose and oppose each other. This hidden dimension precedes and follows upon the interaction of the manic and depressive moods. It is the fluid that you evoke visually and tangibly in your photo's, more than in your visual art which is conceptually oriented.

Your photo's are an amalgam of atmospheres, a simultaneous presence of different realities. Your pictures stand under the sign of the principle of simultaneity: there is no past, there is no future, only the present in which everything takes place with all its contradictions. The world of experience, from which this consciousness springs from, is that of melancholia. Melancholy is bitter as tobacco and sweet as sugar. As a feeling of life, it is addictive, because it is sensitive to the simultaneous existence of unavoidable oppositions.

The melancholic realises that life is finite and infinite. Samsara and Nirvana are one, according to Nagarjuna, the great Indian metaphysician.

Glamour and Apathy are the border phenomena of Melancholia, extremes of which we do not realise that they exist due to each other. The melancholic does realise this, and tries to visualise within the Glamour the Apathy, and within the Apathy the Glamour, fusing light and dark

Let me know, if you recognise yourself in the picture of the melancholic. If so, then you stand in a respectable tradition. Aristotle wrote interesting texts on

melancholia. The ancient Greeks disposed of a remarkable knowledge of the human being, for they had a melancholic and thus an amoral vision on human life. An amoral vision has to precede a moral vision of life, in order to see humans as the embodiment of varying energies and desires. Christianity destroyed that sharp melancholic insight through the introduction of two a priori assumptions: a Sexless God and fallen man, struck by mortal sin. These assumptions, in fact two fantastic lies, created a psychology and ethics with self-destructive tendencies. According to Pierre Klossowski who recently died at a high age, we are still not recovered of the mental shock that Augustine initiated with his vision on Heaven and Earth, or God and Man. Body and mind in Western culture are still two orphans in stead of one child. The ancient Christian ideas and morals continue to affect us, although today under a secularised mask. Many secularists are very like Christians, without realising themselves they are, and do live in half of a world, as do many Christians. It is up to you to make visible in your photo's how reality is many-layered, and full of energy thanks to its simultaneous and unavoidable oppositions.

All the best,

Your Fons Elders