

# Beauty and the beast: art and its passion for the beautiful, the ugly, and the sublime

Andrea Hurst

Philosophy, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Email: andrea.hurst@xxess.co.za

In this article, I investigate the hypothesis that the notions of “the beautiful,” “the ugly,” and “the sublime” articulate the incompatible dimensions of what it means to live the kind of passionate life that most befits humankind. If Plato describes the ultimate object of our passion as a “beautiful cosmos,” a closer look, via Lacanian psychoanalysis, reveals instead an irreducible complexity in its conception, precisely because this ultimate object remains a fundamental delusion. Since humans hope to restore not what they know to be the truly Real, but what they want it to be, one might quite legitimately propose that the truly Real is a state of chaos (the ugly), or paradox (the sublime). The link suggested here between the object of the passions and the notions of “the beautiful,” “the ugly,” and “the sublime” takes some explaining. For this purpose I have drawn upon Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Taking account of the complexity of both the passion as an act and the passion’s object, I have articulated a Lacanian account of human subjectivity as a complex configuration of passions, which can be applied as a heuristic for making sense of the diversity that goes under the name of “truth-telling” *techné* today. Thus, while driven by conflicting passions, many contemporary artists exemplify the notion that art is truth-telling *techné*, and in their various ways offer insight into what it means to live life as a work of art.

**Key words:** Object of passion, complexity, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, truth-telling *techné*

## **Skoonheid en die monster: kuns en haar passie vir die skone, die lelike, en die sublieme**

In hierdie artikel word die hipotese ondersoek, dat die gedagte van die skone, die lelike, en die sublieme die onversoerbare dimensies artikuleer, van wat dit beteken om die soort passievolle lewe wat die mensdom toekom, te leef. Waar Plato die uiteindelijke voorwerp van ons passie as ’n skone kosmos beskryf, word by nadere ondersoek, aan die hand van Lacaniaanse psigoanalise, gevind dat dit eerder ’n onreduseerbare kompleksiteit vertoon, juis omdat hierdie uiteindelijke voorwerp op ’n fundamentele waanbeeld neerkom. Aangesien mense nie die Reële begeer nie, maar wat hulle graag wil hê dit moet wees, kan die Reële tereg as ’n toestand van chaos voorgestel word (die lelike), of as paradoks (die sublieme). Die verband wat hier voorgestel word tussen die voorwerp van die passies en die begrippe van die skone, die lelike, en die sublieme, vereis verduideliking. Met hierdie doel voor oë, word van Lacaniaanse psigoanalitiese teorie gebruik gemaak. Met die kompleksiteit van sowel passie as iets aktiefs, asook van die voorwerp van passie in gedagte, het ek ’n Lacaniaanse weergawe van menslike subjektiwiteit in die vorm van ’n komplekse konfigurasie van passies geformuleer, wat verder op heuristiese wyse aangewend kan word om sin te maak van die uiteenlopendheid van hedendaagse *techné* “wat die waarheid vertel.” Dus, ofskoon hulle deur botsende passies gedryf word, versinnebeeld vele tydensnootlike kunstenaars die gedagte dat kuns waarheidsgeoriënteerde *techné* verteenwoordig, en gee op uiteenlopende wyse insig in wat dit beteken om die lewe as ’n kunswerk te leef.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Voorwerp van passie, kompleksiteit, Lacaniaanse psigoanalitiese teorie, waarheidsgeoriënteerde *techné*.

Since its inception in Plato’s dialogues, philosophy has insisted that we actualize the essence of our humanity by living creatively. A common thread running through diverse philosophical accounts of what it might mean to live creatively is the complex notion of “passion,” for which synonyms are, for example, “love” as Plato (1892a: 456; 1892b: 581-2) understands it, “care,” as Heidegger (1962: 227) understands it, and “drive” in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, which names it, paradoxically, “death drive” (Freud 1968: 7-9). Part of its complexity derives from the fact that term “passion” inscribes both an act and an object; for, precisely in the same sense that consciousness is nothing if it is not consciousness-of, passion cannot be anything if it is not “passion-for.” Insofar as it describes an act, or a mode of being, in the verb sense, passion refers to a living process, or what in Platonic terms can be seen as the way of the soul (Plato 1892c: 214-217; 1892a: 452-454). Briefly, being passionate involves, firstly, a movement from blindness to insight initiated by some form of traumatic awakening to the fact that the present state of affairs is lacking. This disillusionment with, or negation of, the present state of affairs goes hand in hand with the desire for fulfilment. Such fulfilment, in turn, is dependent upon gaining insight into “the truth” (how the world should be), and acting accordingly to restore the present to its truth. The artist’s task then involves the practice of

creative, restorative *techné* or “art.” I use the term “art” in a very broad sense, which includes all arts – including, for example the art of philosophizing. Part of this practice, of course, involves convincing others of the truth discovered through what one may call truth-telling *techné*.

Passion, then, may be described as a drive towards the ultimate “truth” to be found beyond the decadent or lacking actual state of affairs. Notably, in speaking of such truth as the ultimate passion, one shifts to a second sense of the term, which describes what the human passion is a passion for. One may say, then, that the ultimate object of our passion is the truth that lies beyond the lacking present. The nature of this “truth beyond” turns out to be immensely complex. In contemporary terms, it is understood as that excess beyond the lacking current state that is required to restore its wholeness. If we had the means to establish a single sense of “wholeness,” the artist’s task would be clear, albeit not easy; namely, to remake the current state of affairs so that it approximates as closely as possible this sense of wholeness. However, the idea of wholeness is not unified, but complex, in a way that is best understood in terms of Derrida’s (1993: 20-21) “plural logic of the aporia.” Notably, Joan Copjec (1994: 60) names the Lacanian version of the “plural logic of the aporia,” the “paradoxical logic of the whole.”

Briefly, this plural logic involves the argument that all interesting philosophical concepts are best understood in terms of the strictures imposed on their definitions by three different forms of aporia; namely the economic aporia of structured “closure,” or “totality,” the aneconomic aporia of absolutely unstructured “openness,” and, finally, the aporia of paradox. Without certain economic conditions of possibility (the conditions of systematic closure), a concept remains too indeterminate to do any adequate explanatory work. But without the equally necessary aneconomic moment intrinsic to its determination, the concept becomes static and rigid, in which case it cannot work adequately to reflect an inherently diverse and dynamic reality. In both determination and indetermination, then, we face aporias. Under the obligation to choose sides, Derrida argues, we face a third aporia – the aporia of the aporias, for they are joined together as a dilemma, which means that there is no means of choosing between them. Derrida also names this aporia “the impossible.” Understood according to this logic, “wholeness,” for example, gathers together three different aporias, or economic, aneconomic and paradoxical articulations of the whole, associated respectively with the notions of “the beautiful,” “the ugly,” and “the sublime.” These three aporias may be described in terms of the differences between a closed or complicated system, a non-systematic freeplay, and an open-ended complex system (See Cilliers 1998: 3-5).

The first two of these conceptions correlate with Plato’s well-known definitions of “the beautiful” (associated with harmonious, rational, cosmic order) and its binary opposite, “the ugly,” (construed as the disorderly chaos of a non-systematic freeplay) (Murdoch 1977: 73-74). These two conceptions, as Lyotard (1992: 13) notes, are sublime in the modernist sense, where they are viewed as ideal states that are unrepresentable in the sense that they can never be made present due to human limitations: absolute cosmos and absolute chaos exceed our faculties. Since neither can be imagined, let alone experienced, they remain merely negative regulators in the sense that they indicate only that the present state of affairs will never match up to them. The sense of permanent lack may well offer a salutary dose of humility on the one hand, but it also invokes the nostalgia for a “perfection” supposedly lost, and a concomitant reduction of the value of the worldly present (Lyotard 1992: 13).

To avoid the trap of nostalgia without losing the spiritual profit of humility, poststructuralist thinkers like Lacan take recourse to a third concept of wholeness, associated with an open-ended, complex system, whose conflicting terms already indicate its paradoxical nature. This conception of the whole corresponds to Lyotard’s notion of the postmodern sublime; for such a system remains unrepresentable, not because it transcends our limited powers of representation,

but because, as Lyotard (1992: 13) notes, it cannot in principle “let itself be made present,” since its conception involves an undecidable vacillation between the beautiful and the ugly. It is therefore accessible as paradox, which simultaneously renders it ineffable.

To sum up, due to the complexity of the ultimate object of human passion, contemporary artists are driven by conflicting passions as well as mutually antagonistic conceptions of what it would take to remake the current world so that it is restored to its wholeness. These conflicts, then, lead to diverse conceptions of the artist’s truth-telling task. In what follows I argue that a Lacanian account of human subjectivity as a complex configuration of passions, can be applied as a heuristic for making sense of the diversity that goes under the name of “truth-telling” *techné* today, without either attempting to reduce it, or resorting to an anything goes relativism.

### **Lacanian psychoanalytic theory**

To offer a brief account that yet does some justice to Lacan’s theory of human subjectivity as a complex configuration of passions, I shall concentrate on the emergence of the drive, associated with the order of the Real, and thereafter sketch the outlines of its complexification through two further stages of child development marked by entry into the Imaginary and Symbolic orders. Pressing Freud’s (1968: 49-50) introduction of the death drive at the most fundamental level in psychoanalytic theory, in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Lacan (Evans 1996: 33) argues that there is but one passion; namely, the “death drive.” The death drive might be a single passion, but as Derrida (1996: 12) reminds us, it is irreducibly non-simple. As mentioned above, Derrida questions the very possibility of unified (coherent) philosophical “concepts” because he finds that they are invariably split up by an aporetic complexity, which does not take shape as an ordered plurality of compatible meanings, but of an aporetic articulation of incompatible meanings, between which there is no rational basis for choice. Accordingly, he sees the death drive as an inescapably incoherent notion, which gathers incompatible elements together in a single definition, none of which can be done away with without corrupting the definition.

The death drive first manifests at the original infantile trauma, often associated with weaning, when an infant is faced with the shocking truth that the *Nebenmenschen* (primary care-givers) are not integral components of its own physicality, but have minds and bodies of their own. Not only is the pleasure they produce, therefore, not under an infant’s immediate control, but they can also inflict pain either directly or by withholding pleasure. Infants become aware, then, that pure, uninterrupted pleasure (*jouissance*) has been “lost” and correlatively replaced by anxiety. Our response to anxiety is always a drive to eradicate it, thereby restoring a paradisiacal state of *jouissance*. If this unspecified urge to alleviate anxiety had its way, it would reduce tension to zero, producing a state of psychological equilibrium or motivationless repose akin to death – hence its name.

The fundamental dynamic of loss, anxiety and drive constitutes humans as passionate beings. Remarkably, however, this dynamic is constituted on the basis of a delusion, for there never was a primordial state of *jouissance*. As Copjec (2002: 51) notes, what is “remembered” of this state (reminiscent of being in the womb), but importantly, never actually experienced, does not describe the actual human condition. But the delusion goes further still; for we surreptitiously convert the state of *jouissance* into an ontological state (a state of being rather than feeling). In other words, the false memory of pure pleasure is converted into the false memory of a state of physical wholeness: a sense that I am all of existence, and all of existence is me. It is this conversion of *jouissance* into an ontological state that, upon the traumatic shock of finding that the *Nebenmenschen* have the power to go their own way, configures the drive as the urge to restore a state of physical wholeness where absolutely everything remains a

component part of me under my direct control. Happily, this primordially constituted longing for the impossible (an experience of *jouissance*, represented by an internally produced notion of original ontological wholeness) is in principle “aim-inhibited.” The impossibility of its aim, however, does not temper the force of the drive; for it remains unconscious, thus fixed in character at the moment of trauma, and entirely unaffected by subsequent education and experience. Most people accept intellectually that ontological wholeness is not actualisable, but the urge to restore it remains as part of our human endowment. The discrepancy between this mythical state and our actual, abject condition of finitude remains a lifelong source of anxiety, and, as history easily demonstrates, it has engendered the most ingenious strategies to remedy this situation.

Our efforts, all fundamentally aesthetic in nature, to remedy anxiety by restoring the original, “true” state of wholeness, go under the name of “desire” in Lacanian terms, which Lacan (1981: 176) defines as “interpretation itself.” If the drive remains unconscious, what is presented to consciousness is a specific desire. Desire -- for which object *a* is Lacan’s code word, as is Freud’s *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* (“ideational representative”) -- can be understood as that which gives a determinate “shape” to that towards which the death drive is directed (Lacan 1992: 52-3). Object *a* represents the belief that *this*, ultimately, is what it will take to make it all whole again and thereby restore the lost *jouissance*. Notably, however, as the German term suggests, object *a* is the representative of a representation. It names a desired specific object that stands in for, or is a simulacrum of, the retrospectively articulated idea (delusion) of “lost” ontological wholeness. Put differently, the delusion of the original ontological whole, directs the unconscious synthesis by which individuals project into consciousness a representative (object *a*), invested with the supposed power to restore such wholeness. The “ideational representative” is projected into consciousness on the mistaken assumption that, given the right conditions (time, effort, and a little more hard work at putting the decadent world right), the whole can be “re-found” in experience (Lacan 1992: 52).

Yet, if what is supposed to be re-found never was anything but the internally constituted psychical representative of *jouissance*, then even if, negatively speaking, one senses a loss of *jouissance*, it is impossible to specify what has been lost, and any interpretation of the drive as a specific desire, whose aim is to do exactly this, will fall short. What is supposed to be re-found, as Lacan (1992: 52) puts it, “is to be found at the most as something missed.” Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that we can do without such “ideational representatives” (a system of projected intentional objects) based on the delusional dream of a wholeness in which *jouissance* is restored. For in its absence, Lacan (1992: 52-3) notes, “a world of perception cannot be organized in a valid way, cannot be constituted in a human way.” Lacan stresses our dependence on an aporetic fundamental delusion not to eradicate it, but to explain its structure, and thereby remind us that the “automaton,” the world we gather together around us, based on a certain conception of the whole, is a very carefully constructed safety net, prosthetic device, or work of art, which, even at its best, remains fallible. Importantly, since the object of the death drive (the original ontological whole) is an internally produced concept, it remains incoherent in the Derridean sense described above. That is, the idea of “the All,” gathers together under one concept equally irreducible but incompatible meanings, differentiated in terms of irreconcilable conceptions of the infinite.

Firstly, corresponding to Plato’s notion of beauty, the whole may be thought of as an “all-at-once” infinite: an all-encompassing unity of all with all, where nothing is left out, and there are no loose ends or anomalies. Implicitly, then, the infinite universe is fundamentally a cosmos, within whose system everything has a meaningful place. When the All is projected as an “all-at-once” infinite, the death drive manifests as an urge to restore this “remembered” primordial

cosmos by returning all things to their proper places (from which they have supposedly fallen). Object *a*, then, takes the shape of the ultimate structure, condition, state of affairs, whose perfection will restore the universe to its proper shape; hence the myriad scientific, philosophical, or religious fictions about the course of the world. We use names like “God,” or “quark” to bring the unknowable within a manageable compass, quietly forgetting that such labels form a veneer over the truth of our uncertainty. Thus, what can be called a paranoid response to anxiety constitutes a refusal to lose faith in beauty as descriptive of the original state of the Real. The current state of imperfection is qualified by the hope inscribed in the word “yet”: things may not be perfect yet, but perfection remains conceivable sometime in a future that is, perhaps, beyond the worldly. Such paranoia constitutes a form of nihilism, since the actual world is devalued in face of the metaphysical delusion of future perfection -- hence Plato’s relentless disdain for the essentially errant material world. The Demiurge of Plato’s *Timaeus*, as Murdoch (1977: 75-76) notes, “has to accept a degree of ‘absurdity’ (jumble), but he retains the ideal of harmony, and the disorder which faces him is to be deplored, and neither exaggerated nor celebrated.” Accordingly, she adds, the best *techné* is a matter of emulating “the calm unenvious Demiurge who sees the recalcitrant jumble of his material with just eyes, and with a commanding sense of proportion.”

The conception of infinity that underpins the paranoid nihilism just described, however, names a logical impossibility: a totality that has no bounds. The aporia of the “all-at-once” infinite, then, manifests in the impossibility of encompassing the infinite. To form a totality of infinity is a contradiction in terms. Given that there is, therefore, something wrong with this attempt to conceptualise “the All” as that which encompasses absolutely everything, one may easily turn to the opposite extreme, and try to determine “the All” not as a circumscribed cosmic unity, but as an infinite flow of fragments; a loose, dynamic circulation of atoms or energy, which is compromised in principle by any attempt to structure or encompass it. In other words, the universe is at bottom precisely what Plato rejected as “ugly,” namely, a chaos, where nothing ultimately makes sense. In this case, every paranoid desire for a beautifully formed totality must be resisted in the name of what one could call the “successive infinite,” and all bonds must be dissolved in order to achieve the sought after restoration of wholeness.

When the All is projected as a “successive infinite,” the death drive manifests as an urge to restore the “remembered” primordial condition (the oceanic flow), by returning all formed things to their original condition of peaceful dissolution, which is violated by the imposition of forms and structures. Object *a*, therefore, describes the imagined condition that engenders absolute emancipation by dissolving limiting bonds, and shattering imprisoning structures. Accordingly, what can be called a “hysterical” response to anxiety is at bottom a “rebound from ‘God is truth’ to the fanatical faith ‘All is false’” (Nietzsche 1968: 7). Poisonous uncertainty is again repressed for the sake of certainty at the cost of its potentially curative power, for hysterical desire invokes a nihilistic certainty of the opposite kind: the certainty that every event is unique and fleeting, all forms are fake façades, and nothing is sacred. The artist’s task, then, is to remind humanity of this truth of “absolute untruth” by making every effort to resist, subvert and destroy all fake forms, not to replace them with better structures, but to reinstate the freedom of original chaos. It is equally logically impossible to conceive the whole in terms of the successive infinite, for one cannot grasp the absolute “All” of an endless succession. The very concept of a whole (the set of All that there is) demands the impossible; namely a final cut-off point for  $n+1$ .

These opposing forms of nihilism (derived from opposite impossibilities), however, are not the only available options. Nietzsche (1968: 22) offers the possibility of an affirmative form of nihilism, tacitly supported by a complex conception of the infinite which obeys the logic of compound interest where “feedback” engendered by and dependent on an original system,

returns as a subsequent modifier that becomes part of the original system. Here, the infinite may be understood in terms of the paradoxical open-endedness of an endlessly self-transcending totality, or the incoherence represented by the paradox of “immanent transcendence,” marked by the disconcerting figure of the undecidable. A clear example of this complex infinite is an ecosystem, whose status remains undecidable in the sense that it is neither closed nor open, static nor dynamic, cosmos nor chaos, and so on.

When the All is understood in terms of the paradox of “immanent transcendence,” the death drive is inhibited by the recognition that the truly Real remains undecidable. In this case, Object *a* becomes a self-transcending condition that excites desire forever, because desire creates desire in the form of compound interest. For example, the passion for wisdom might manifest as a desire to read the works of every thinker, and to master every possible theoretical insight. But the attempt to satisfy such a desire amplifies it, not due to our vast store of knowledge, but because the learning process modifies what we think we know. Here, then, desire does find satisfaction, but in finding it, creates more desire, so forcing us to face and learn to live with the persistence of anxiety.

To sum up, the death drive remains intrinsically incoherent since the ideational construct towards which it aims (the notion of the whole) pulls it in opposing directions: towards cosmos (binding), chaos (un-binding), or undecidability (Penelope, who unbinds as she binds). This drive, therefore, is split over three incompatible libidinal styles: either one of the double-sided, oppositionally articulated styles that, roughly following Lacan, we may call “paranoiac” (a passion for the restoration of beauty or the repression of uncertainty in the name of absolute truth) or “hysterical” (a passion for ugliness or the repression of uncertainty in the name of absolute untruth), or the revivification of a third alternative, which does not hanker after certainty, but recognizes the mutual contamination of these two quests for certainty. One may call this movement from certainty to truth, associated with the dislocating sense of the sublime, “paradoxical.” Lacan’s model of the subject as a configuration and passions involves further complexity, generated by the fact that the three-part structure of this divided passion repeats over three incompatible, but interlocking areas of concern, tied to the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic orders. The three forms of nihilism described above, which together represent a multifaceted concern for the world-whole (tied to the order of the Real) are overlaid, but not erased, by a similarly multifaceted concern for the soul (narcissism), and later the social-whole (altruism).

Narcissism is layered over infantile nihilism during what Lacan (1977: 1-7) calls the “mirror stage.” Literally, the coordinated and unified mirror image reflects a bodily wholeness that an infant does not actually experience; but the mirror image is also a metaphor for the ideal ego. The anxiety to which narcissistic desire is a response is associated with the moment when one recognises that the actual body/ego does not compare favourably with the ideal. This recognition of lack, hand-in-hand with the implicit injunction to become whole, precipitates a traumatic “identity crisis,” and a correlative concern for the state of one’s soul, typified by the question Plato (1892a: 434) poses in the *Phaedrus*, “am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typho, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort?” When the ideal ego is projected in terms of the “all-at-once” infinite (here, the equivalent of the universal cosmos would be the beautiful soul), the death drive, reflected in the aphorism “become who you are” manifests as self-love in the form of a paranoiac urge to edify and improve the broken and decadent actual ego, restoring the self to a previous state of perfection from which it has supposedly fallen. The serene repose of the perfected self would issue from complete self-understanding and self-actualization, and therefore, order, balance and unity in its constituent parts. When the ideal ego is projected in terms of the “successive infinite” (here, the equivalent of universal chaos would be the utterly free spirit), the death drive, in its narcissistic mode

manifests as an urge to restore primordial freedom to the actual ego, which has become weak and decadent in its submission to the fictions of “beauty.” A hysterical narcissist, then, insists that the truly free human spirit emerges in its resistance to the restrictive demands for perfection in the soul that we cannot hope to achieve. When the ideal ego is projected in terms of the paradox of “immanent transcendence” (the ultimate nature of the soul remains undecidable), the death drive towards either self-perfection or self-destruction is inhibited by the recognition, rather than the denial, of the ideal-ego’s ambivalence. Seeing that it functions both as loved prosthesis and alienating armour (Lacan 1977: 4), one faces, and learns to negotiate, the irreconcilable ambiguity of its demand. Here, the soul’s love for itself creates a soul worth loving; for striving to match the actual ego with an ideal encourages self-edification, which, in turn, becomes the impetus for the ideal’s reinvention. Identity, then, is neither a fixed and imprisoning ideal, nor an unbridled proliferation of identities in the name of freedom from any one of them.

The altruistic mode of the drive, expressed as concern for others in its myriad manifestations (intersubjective relations, roles and hierarchies, politics, ethics), is again associated with a form of anxiety; a “crisis of connection” characterised by the angst that we experience when confronted by the incorrigible ambivalence of the social whole, which is equally the prosthetic domain of support networks (of sharing, belonging and mutual empowerment) and the decapitating arena of disempowerment, tyranny and submission.

When the intersubjective unity is projected as an “all-at-once” infinite (a cosmos), the death drive manifests as an urge to recreate the primordial condition of social harmony by returning all people to their proper places in the social system. Object *a*, then, takes the shape of the ultimate social (political, ethical, organizational, or institutional) state of affairs, whose perfection will restore social harmony. When the intersubjective unity is projected as an “successive infinite” (the social whole is an infinite concatenation of atomistic individuals each of equal value), the death drive manifests as an urge to restore social harmony by emancipating all people from the tyranny of illegitimately imposed, hierarchical inequalities that alienate individuals from their original freedom. Object *a*, then, still takes the shape of the ultimate social state of affairs whose perfection will restore social harmony, but such social harmony, this time, is understood as a free, “oceanic” flow of equal individuals. A hysterical response to the crisis of connection, then, describes a state of perpetual rebellion; the relentless criticism of any existing social structures in the name of absolute social emancipation. When the intersubjective unity is projected in terms of the paradox of “immanent transcendence,” the death drive is inhibited by the recognition that the construction of social institutions is characterised by multiple aporias that cannot be overcome. Again, paradoxical altruism is a matter of facing the anxiety associated with the irreconcilable demands placed upon intersubjective life by the ambivalent supporting/imprisoning character of social whole, which, like the mirror image, functions both as comforting and alienating. Paradoxical altruists, for example, are not content to operate only within the bounds of convention, yet do not accept that a constant state of rebellion remains the only other option. A person driven by paradoxical altruism settles for the constant reflective dismantling and re-invention of all institutions.

This, in the end, makes for nine possible passions. The nihilistic concern for the world-whole, divided into three different libidinal styles, manifests as: 1) a paranoiac passion to restore the world to the perfect order of its true, original beauty; 2) a hysterical passion to free the world from the stultifying delusion of beauty by uncovering its underlying decadence; 3) a paradoxical passion for the life-giving aporia of immanent transcendence; the chaos within order, and the order within chaos. Similarly, the narcissistic concern for the self manifests as: 1) a paranoiac passion to match the actual ego with the perfect ideal-ego; 2) a hysterical passion to resist the constraints of an identity imposed from on high; 3) a paradoxical passion for the

life-giving aporia associated with the circular injunction “become who you are.” Finally, the altruistic concern for social harmony manifests as: 1) a paranoiac passion to restore the social unit to its perfect state of harmonious order; 2) a hysterical passion to emancipate humanity from the tyranny of law and order and restore the state of oceanic fusion; 3) a paradoxical passion for the life-giving aporia of an open community.

### ***Techné* and the Lacanian heuristic**

This configuration of passions offers a complex heuristic for interpreting and placing the diverse events and modes of expression that today go under the name of truth-telling *techné*. In its terms, for example, the conflicting concerns that motivate artists as different as Andy Goldsworthy, Hannah Wilke, and Gina Pane, belong to different orders of being; respectively the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. If one considers the works documented in Goldsworthy’s “*A Collaboration with Nature*,” all of which stress the creative tension between what is found in nature and what is fabricated, in response, through human *techné*, it is clear that they are motivated by a fundamental concern with the nature of the world-whole. As he notes in his introductory text (1990), each object he works with, in his words: “is an opening into the process of life within and around it.” All further citations come from Goldsworthy’s introductory text; there are no page numbers. His passion for discovering and revealing the true natural process is reflected in his desire to “get under the surface,” and again in the following remarks: “All forms are to be found in nature, and there are many qualities within any material. By exploring them I hope to understand the whole,” and: “At its most successful, my ‘touch’ looks into the heart of nature; most days I don’t even get close.”

By stark contrast, “I-Object,” the felicitous title of Petra Löffler’s (2001: 554) textual accompaniment to Wilke’s work in *Woman Artists in the 20th and 21st Century*, precisely captures the spirit of her predominantly narcissistic passion, which addresses the fundamental question of individual entitlement in determining personal identity. Her narcissism is not simply a matter of presenting her own body as the subject/object of her artwork -- one can do precisely this while directed by a different concern. Pane’s “body experiments,” for example, are driven by an expressly altruistic aim “to demystify the image of the body as the citadel of our individuality, in order to restore it to its true reality, the function of social communication” (cited in Wege 2001: 428). Driven by narcissism, Wilke’s art consists of an effort to wrest her own body from external impositions, such as the stereotyping that plays such a large role in social communication, and the absurdly cruel, impersonal dictates of illness. The point of her photographic self-portraits is to reclaim her body for herself, precisely as the “citadel” of her individuality. One therefore cannot understand her artworks independently of their demand for the sole right to self-presentation, which is motivated by a passion to discover, tell the truth about, and enact the soul’s essential autonomy. Unlike the works produced by Goldsworthy and Pane, which may be understood entirely in the absence of any biographical information, one requires prior anecdotal information about Hannah Wilke’s biography in order to grasp a series such as her *Intra-Venus*, 1992/93 (Löffler 2001: 555-8). Without the knowledge that she is suffering from a mortal illness, one entirely misses her strong objection to the tyranny disease has exerted over her body in the form of a photograph which depicts her own bloated, dying body in the typical pose of a woman giving birth. One also misses the subtle ironies inscribed in the title of the series, and the fundamental questions it raises concerning the claims to be made for self-love, and for an internal, non-appearing self beyond the contingencies determining one’s external appearance.



The direct conflict between the altruistic passion motivating Pane's work and the narcissistic concern represented by Wilke, is well illustrated by her *Discours mou et mat*, 1975, where, as Astrid Wege (2001: 431) describes it, she

attacked her self-portrait, which was sketched on a mirror lying on the floor. In the course of the action, she smashed with her fists a sheet of glass that was lying on the mirror. But while this one sheet of glass shattered into a thousand pieces, both the mirror and a second mirror bearing the word "alienation" remained unbroken -- suggesting that the attempt to push through to an image of self free of alienation had failed.

In other words, given what she perceives as the endemic failure of the narcissistic project to claim personal control of one's identity (which would imply precisely "an image of self free of alienation"), Pane places her faith in an opposing strategy encapsulated in a 1975 interview where "she observed that during an action her own image of her body became increasingly detached from her, and she then had to reconstruct that image by means of a give-and-take interchange with the audience, a to-and-fro between her own image and theirs" (cited in Wege 2001: 431). The choreographed artistic actions referred to here, are motivated by the notion that pain is an ego-shattering experience, no less for the being who is in pain than for those who inflict pain or observe another's pain. The experience of pain, then, opens humans up to one another. Her works, therefore, which include a diversity of wounding rituals, are designed to produce her body as "the instrument of pain and the site of recognition" (Wege 2001: 431). As Wege remarks: "To Pane's way of thinking, the 'body' is not only an anatomical given, it is also a system of social signs, a screen upon which images are projected, both one's own and images from outside." Of course, art requires an audience in order to perform its truth-telling function. But unlike Goldsworthy's "collaboration with nature" and Wilke's "self-presentations," which require the audience to see and to reflect, Pane's "body-experiments" demand more from the audience, namely, a willingness to participate in the creative act itself. This is one of the characteristics that mark it out as a form of altruism rather than nihilism or narcissism.

The Lacanian heuristic explains why artists driven by the same concerns, nevertheless often show conflicting styles of addressing these concerns, depending on whether their passion for wisdom is predominantly drawn by the "truth" of fundamental ontological beauty, ugliness, or sublimity. Nihilism, as the primordial condition for passionate be-ing, rests on the fundamental assumption that "what is" has fallen away from what it originally truly was, and therefore should be negated, in order to restore being to its true state. As a paradoxical nihilist, what Goldsworthy aims to negate is the insistent human desire for resolution in our relationship with nature and our tendency to settle on prematurely stabilised, and therefore untrue, forms. One may think of *A Collaboration with Nature* as a composite work in which documented "events" embody paradox or "uncomfortable though creative tensions," which Goldsworthy resists resolving (1990: Introduction). To the contrary, he relies on these tensions, he remarks, "to sharpen my relationship with nature. I refuse to resolve them prematurely to make my own position easier." Indeed, to resolve the paradox at all, in the name of comfort, would be to falsify the relationship between human artist and nature.

Thus, in his work-process, contingency, luck, and chance ("I take the opportunities each day offers") are juxtaposed with intentionality ("some places I return to over and over again, going deeper"). The secret, hidden, and opaque stand in tension with the clear and obvious ("the best of my work, sometimes the result of much struggle when made, appears so obvious that it is incredible I didn't see it before. It was there all the time"). Goldsworthy also speaks of a fine attunement between the moods of nature and his own ideas. On the one hand, to succeed an idea must remain in flexible attunement with the moods of nature: "Often I can only follow a train of thought while a particular weather condition persists. When a change comes, the idea

must alter or it will, and often does, fail.” On the other hand, nature’s moods notwithstanding, some ideas persist in their own right: “I am sometimes left stranded by a change in the weather with half-understood feelings that have to travel with me until conditions are right for them to reappear.”

Internal to the works themselves, dynamic tensions also persist between growth and decay, internal and external, earth and self, flexibility and persistence, change and repetition, loose and tight, disorder and regularity, and so on. As Goldsworthy remarks: “Sometimes a work is at its best when most threatened by the weather. A balanced rock is given enormous tension and force by a wind that might cause its collapse.” Interestingly, Goldsworthy’s encounter with absence (“the hole”) presupposes a corresponding positive presence, which is put into question thereby. In his words: “The hole has become an important element. Looking into a deep hole unnerves me. My concept of stability is questioned and I am made aware of the potent energies within the earth. The black is that energy made visible.” The paradox here is double. Firstly, the enigmatic energy of the negative, of absence, is given the positive presence or visibility of the blackness that reveals it. Secondly, the stable form itself is the very condition necessary to produce the hole that subverts its stability.

Like Goldsworthy, Robert Smithson is equally driven by nihilism, expressed as a concern to express the underlying truth of the world-whole; yet the truth he aims to tell through his work is significantly different. If the title of his series, *Nonsites*, 1968, which highlights his preoccupation with the negative, absence, dislocation, and dissociation, is already a telling indication of the hysterical style of his nihilism, this style becomes particularly pronounced in his *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. It is something of a dominant cliché, as John Beardsley (1998: 20) remarks, that landscape artists have an obligation to design and place their works in sensitive consultation with the *genius loci*. Yet it is telling that Goldsworthy, for example, invariably finds that the spirit of a place expresses the paradoxical tension between cosmos and chaos. By contrast, at the Great Salt Lake in Utah, which was to become the site of his *Spiral Jetty*, Smithson (cited in Beardsley 1998: 20) reports an almost mystical experience as the place transformed before his eyes from a site of imprisonment (the Salt Lake “resembled an impassive faint violet sheet held captive in a stony matrix”) to a non-site possessed by an overpowering spirit of underlying chaos. Perhaps a site is chosen precisely because it resonates with an artist’s predominant passion. Observing the site’s industrial wreckage, abandoned after a failed oil-extraction enterprise, Smithson (in Beardsley 1998: 22) describes a sensation of great pleasure. Such pleasure may be ascribed to the invigorating sense of freedom that hysterical nihilists typically associate with incoherent structures, abandoned hopes, as well as decay and industrial ruin; here enhanced by the “shattered appearance” given to the region by the irregular limestone beds and black basalt deposits (Smithson in Beardsley 1998: 22). As Beardsley (1998: 22) remarks, “Smithson’s vocabulary -- *shattered, fractured, corrosion* -- reveals his preoccupation with entropy as a measure of disorder.” It is hardly surprising, then, that for Smithson the *genius loci* began to impose itself upon his senses, in the form of an “immobile cyclone” or “dormant earthquake,” which he describes as “a spinning sensation without movement” (cited in Beardsley 1998: 22). One might think that his urge to “organise this mess of corrosion into patterns, grids and subdivisions,” that is, to construct an artwork, sounds a contrary note. It does, mercifully; for a passion is increasingly “purified” at the proportionate risk of pathology, and none can claim absolute purity. Consistent with a predominantly hysterical nihilism, however, the “organization” Smithson actualises is the “open, irreversible” form of a spiral, whose gyre does not widen but collapses inward with the circular force of a whirlpool (Beardsley 1998: 22). Thus the dark form of the spiral jetty, which Smithson describes as “coming from nowhere, going nowhere,” penetrates the “impassive faint violet sheet” and draws its waters down through the “black hole” engendered by its circular

force. In so negating the imprisoning structures that held the water “captive in a stony matrix,” Smithson invokes the “truth” of primordial chaos.

Narcissism presents a similar diversity. As a paradoxical narcissist, what Wilke aims to negate in her “self-presentation” is an insistent tendency among humans to categorise one another in terms of fixed, dependable, stable stereotypes that reduce individual identity to the untruth of superficial masks. Wilke’s insistent demand for the sole right to self-presentation manifests negatively in her work as a strong objection to external impositions. Notably, then, the message of her work is only this: I am *not* what you take me to be. Her objection to stereotyping is not made in the name of some positive, content-filled notion of her genuine identity; that is, a kernel of true self-identity that supersedes such external impositions as stereotyping and illness. She offers no indication in its place of who she truly is. An audience has to know about her to understand her work, but it never comes to know her. The paradox of her position, then, lies in the fact that she reserves the right to “present” herself as essentially unpresentable.

Orlan is similarly narcissistic, in the sense that her work embodies the same refusal to be determined by contingencies, or by others, and expresses a strong “will to power” over her own self-presentation (Gerrit Gohlke 2001: 414-419). But if Wilke demands sole possession of an inner being, which remains enigmatic insofar as it is unpresentable, for Orlan the true substance of the “self” evidently consists in its visible, presentable surfaces. The difference is subtly, but clearly, indicated by her careful treatment of the eyes in her various works. In Wilke’s photographs, her eyes tend to address the audience with the candid challenge of a self-possessed “I,” who holds a card or two up her sleeve. By contrast, in Orlan’s *Official Portrait after Quarantine*, 1993 (Gohlke 2001: 419), the eyes are carefully averted to the left and slightly upwards, offering neither address nor appeal, but effectively deflecting any communicative contact from one to another. Remaining an opaque screen behind which, it is suggested, there is nothing deeper, these eyes challenge their conventional status as the so-called windows to the soul. This suggestion is reinforced by the few occasions in which Orlan’s eyes do supposedly address the viewer directly. In *Nuna Sculpture with Scars*, 2000 (Gohlke 2001: 417), the eyes gaze directly at the viewer, but the unnatural widening and stark make-up renders them as artificial and indeed expressionless as the eyes of a doll or mask. Further, in *Women Resemble Flowers to the Moon of my Eyes*, 1993 (Gohlke 2001: 417), the right eye is deeply shadowed and the bloated left eye seems to “address” the viewer both obliquely and frontally, creating an uncanny one-eyed distortion of perspective that subverts its supposed address. While this subversion of self might suggest a resonance between Orlan and Pane, the motivation behind such ego-erasure in each case is entirely different. Orlan’s primary concern remains tied to questions concerning her personal power of manipulation and control over self-identity, which she will not give over to any other. Unlike Pane, then, she rejects, rather than invites, intervention by others. It is telling that when such intervention became unavoidable (here, in the form of medical intervention), she found a way to commandeer the process by producing her operation as an artwork, and subsequently voluntarily reproducing her “submission” to the knife, albeit strictly according to her own dictates (Gohlke 2001: 414). One may see her narcissism as predominantly hysterical in nature, insofar as it manifests in her refusal to assume any particular identity, and her insistence that the images projected by wilfully manipulating the surfaces of her body lack any binding force, since they remain protean in their potential and temporary in status.

All altruism is motivated by the drive towards social unity, but the way that this drive manifests in specific desires diverges dramatically depending on whether the social whole is conceived as an oceanic fusion of all with all, a systematic connectivity, or a paradoxical open-ended unity. That Pane’s artwork is motivated by a hysterical desire for ego-erasure, not in

the name of personal power to determine the forms self-presentation, but in the name of an empathetic fusion of all with all, emerges clearly in her observation that she opens up her own body for others to see their own blood there: “When I open up my ‘body,’ so that you can see your own blood there, I do it out of love for you, love for the other” (cited in Wege 2001: 431). By contrast, Suzi Gablik (1991: 69) describes another altruistic artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, as an active embodiment of a “connective” self, whose work addresses the fundamental demands placed upon individuals by social responsibility. Motivated by a predominantly paranoiac desire to engender social harmony through a system of sympathetic connectivity, for which the handshake stands as the most potent symbol, Ukeles embarked on an eleven-month performance work, called *Touch Sanitation*, 1981, in which she personally shook hands with every sanitation worker in New York’s five boroughs (Gablik 1991: 70).

To sum up briefly, taking it as read that the kind of life that most befits humankind is creative, and by extension passionate, I have proposed that the notions of “the beautiful,” “the ugly,” and “the sublime” articulate incompatible, but equally necessary aspects of the ultimate object of human passion. In Lacanian terms, this object may be described as the fundamental delusion of wholeness, which refers to the so-called “truly Real,” that we associate with a longed for, albeit impossible, jouissance. Following Lacan, I argued that humans desire the restoration not of what they know to be the truly Real, but of what they want it to be, and for this reason, one may argue, equally truthfully and falsely that the ultimate object of our passion is a beautiful cosmos, or a state of chaos (the ugly). Ultimately, I support the poststructuralist stance that names it an insuperable paradox (the postmodern sublime). Taking account of the complexity of this yearning for the impossible, concerning both the passion as an act, and the passion’s object, I developed a Lacanian account of human subjectivity as a complex configuration of nine possible passions, in order to apply it as a heuristic for making sense of the artistic productions of a number of contemporary artists. If one considers the spectrum of arts that go under the name of truth-telling *techné*, this small sketch that covers a few examples from the plastic arts merely touches lightly upon the tip of an ice-berg. Looking forward, one could, I suspect, productively apply the same heuristic for the sake of understanding arts as widely diverse as those of the poets, musicians and philosophers.

## Works cited

- Beardsley, J. 1998. *Earthworks and beyond: Contemporary art in the landscape*. Third Edition. New York: Abbeville.
- Cilliers, P. 1998. *Complexity and postmodernism: Understanding complex systems*. London: Routledge.
- Copjec, J. 2002. *Imagine there’s no woman: Ethics and sublimation*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Copjec, J. 1994. *Read my desire: Lacan against the historicists*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.
- Derrida, J. 1993. *Aporias*. Tr. Dutoit, T. California: Stanford University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1996. *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*. Tr. Prenowitz, E. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Evans, D. 1996. *An introductory dictionary of Lacanian psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge.
- Freud, S. 1968. Beyond the pleasure principle. *SE, Vol. XVIII*. Ed. & Tr. Strachey, J. London: The Hogarth Press: 7-64.

- Gablik, S. 1991. *The reenchantment of art*. New York: Thames and Hudson.
- Gohlke, G. 2001. Carnal art. In: *woman artists in the 20th and 21st century*. Ed. Grosenick, U. Köln: Taschen: 414-419.
- Goldsworthy, A. 1990. *A collaboration with nature*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers.
- Heidegger, M. 1962. *Being and time*. Tr. Macquarrie, J. & Robinson, E. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Lacan, J. 1977. The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience. In *Écrits: A selection*. Tr. Sheridan, A. New York: Norton: 1-7.
- Lacan, J. 1981. *The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis*. Tr. Sheridan, A. New York: Norton.
- Lacan, J. 1992. *The ethics of psychoanalysis: 1959-1960: The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*. Ed. Miller, J-A. Tr. Porter, D. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Löffler, P. 2001. "I-object." In: *woman artists in the 20th and 21st century*. Ed. Grosenick, U. Köln: Taschen: 554-559.
- Lyotard, J-F. 1992. *The postmodern explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*. Tr. Barry, D., et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Murdoch, I. 1977. *The fire & the sun: Why Plato banished the artists*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Nietzsche, F. 1968. *The will to power*. Tr. Kaufmann, W. & Hollingdale, R.J. Ed. Kaufmann, W. New York: Vintage Books.
- Plato. 1892a. Phaedrus. In: *The dialogues of Plato: Translated into English*. Vol. 1. Third Edition. Tr. Jowett, B. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 431-489.
- Plato. 1892b. Symposium. In: *The dialogues of Plato: Translated into English*. Vol. 1. Third Edition. Tr. Jowett, B. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 541-594.
- Plato. 1892c. Republic. In: *The dialogues of Plato: Translated into English*. Vol. 3. Third Edition. Tr. Jowett, B. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wege, A. 2001. "The Art of the Body." In *Woman Artists in the 20th and 21st Century*, edited by Uta Grosenick. Köln: Taschen, 426-431.

Andrea Hurst is a Research Associate and part-time lecturer in Philosophy at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. She holds two Master's degrees in Philosophy, one from UPE and one from Villanova University, USA, as well as a PhD. in Philosophy from Villanova University. She has published nationally and internationally in Philosophy, mainly on the work of Jacques Derrida and other Continental thinkers such as Lyotard, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Gadamer, Lacan and Nietzsche.