



UGLY

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*Photo by : Jacob Silberberg
A man collects blood at the Oluwainshola Cattle Market and Slaughter Yard on the outskirts of Lagos. When an animal is slaughtered, no part goes to waste. The blood is boiled to reduce it and once it has cooled and solidified it can be sold as a supplement to sheep feed.*

Why Ugly ?

What is ugliness? Is ugliness the exact opposite of beauty? When examining the history of ugliness, it would be oversimplified to see ugliness only as the opposite of beauty. Obviously, the concept of beauty and ugliness not only varies from culture to culture, but also changes over time.

UGLY

adjective

1. unpleasant or repulsive, especially in appearance.
2. likely to cause inconvenience or discomfort
3. morally offensive or objectionable

Why write about Ugly? Well, as far as I can remember, I was helplessly preoccupied with the looks of things. I am passionate about appearances and always wanted to understand them.

The construct of 'Beauty vs Ugly' is the most perplexing in our imagination. Is there really such a thing as ugliness? It's commonplace to assume the answer is 'yes'. And it is common to assume that ugliness is necessarily bad.

For Albert Camus, it was beauty that he found unbearable: "Beauty plunges us into despair, providing for a brief moment the eternity we always want to stretch out."

So beauty is unattainable, while ugliness is unavoidable? Beauty stimulates metaphysical reflection, but ugliness is only annoying. And "beauty" is not always pleasant. Beautiful perfection can be boring and sometimes downright disturbing.

I don't really like to wander in the puddles of relativism, but the more I think about ugliness, the more I see it, the more difficult it becomes to understand. Aesthetics is the science of beauty, but it's an imprecise science. In fact, in terms of evidence and repeatable experimental results, and peer review, it's not a science at all.

"Beauty is in some way boring, even if its concept changes through the ages, never the less, a beautiful object must always follow certain rules. Sort of speak; a beautiful nose shouldn't be longer than 'that' or shorter than 'that'. On the contrary, an ugly nose can be as long as the one of Pinocchio, as big as the one of an elephant or like the beak of an eagle. Ugliness is unpredictable and offers an infinite range of possibilities. Beauty is finite, ugliness is infinite, like God."

-Umberto Eco

Photo by : Arnold Eagle
Federal Art Project - 1935
Interior of a Room Littered with Trash and
Bathtub



Rosenkranz & Marx

Karl Rosenkranz 's 'Ästhetik des Hässlichen' (Aesthetics of Ugliness) was published in 1853. In his introduction , he proposes that understanding the ugly as the inverse of the beautiful, is incomplete and evidently incorrect. As merely a negative attribute, ugliness cannot have a sensual form and therefore cannot become an aesthetic object. He endeavors to reconsider ugliness as a condition in itself, but despite his reluctance, finds no alternative but to arrive at the subject of ugliness through a definition of beauty that relies on harmony and totality, realizing that the primary requirements of the beautiful are boundaries ; it must acquire unity and relate its differences as organic moments of that unity. Thus, ugliness is first the negation of beauty and formal definitude. But perhaps more importantly, while the mere absence of form is neither beautiful nor ugly, formlessness becomes ugliness or where form is not yet adequately developed.

Ugliness was defined very well by Marx in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 as something that was only meaningful in the absence of money or, as we might understand his words, of power.

"I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women. Therefore I am not ugly, for the effect of ugliness--its deterrent power--is nullified by money. I, according to my individual characteristics, am lame, but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet. Therefore I am not lame. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and hence its possessor... I am brainless, but money is the real brain of all things and how then should its possessor be brainless? Besides, he can buy clever people for himself, and is he who has power over the clever not more clever than the clever?"

- Karl Marx

Photo by: Reddit user
Molten wax drips on a cold surface



Types of Ugly

Gustav E. Pazaurek, a museum curator, poet, playwright and leading figure in the Deutscher Werkbund - an industrial collective intent on improving standards of design, determined that there were five categories that could lead to ugliness:

Material mistakes

- Inferior materials, toxic substances, cheap processes, concealed flaws
- Objects made of human or animal parts
- Painstaking hobbies which overtax materials
- Handicrafts which ignore the inherent properties of a material
- Anything made of an inappropriately costly material or pretending to be more valuable ones
- One material crafted to ape the character of another
- Shallow material puns

Design mistakes

- Flat patterns made into 3-D objects
- Anything made either too heavy or too light
- Anything with sharp edges; a vessel which does not pour; a handle uncomfortable to hold; anything which cannot be cleaned with ease
- Combination objects, not optimally suitable for either purpose
- Functional objects in forms that have no intelligent relationship to their purpose
- Machine production that apes the effects of handicraft
- Frivolous inventions
- Forgeries

Decorative mistakes

- Obtrusive or odd proportions
- Manic ornamentation; Decoration used to disguise flaws
- Unskilled or unintelligent use of decoration, such as ignoring the natural logic
- Any decoration created by accident
- Mockery or misuse of national emblems
- Anachronisms and exotica
- Exaggerated finishes including iridescence, fluorescence
- Primitivism and folk art

Kitsch mistakes

- Jingoism
- Souvenirs
- Folklorica
- Religiosity

Contemporary mistakes

- Brutalizing objects that encourage aggression
- Anything made for children
- Wasted resources, especially single-use or disposable objects
- Pollution
- Animal trophies
- Sexism and racism
- Exaggerated claims of exclusiveness

Among all reformers of consumer consciousness and art education, Pazaurek's Principles have never been surpassed for their details, thoroughness and perhaps persuasiveness.





Photo by: YuMaNuMa
A musical jolly chimp manufactured by the
Japanese company, Daishin C.K.

Kitsch

The classic definition of kitsch is published in Pazaurek's paper 'Good and Bad Taste in Applied Arts' (1912):

"The absolute antithesis of artistically inspired work of quality is tasteless mass rubbish or kitsch: it disregards all the demands of ethics, logic and aesthetics; it is indifferent to all crimes and offences against the material, technique, and functional or artistic form; it knows only one commandment: the object must be cheap and yet still attempt to create at least some impression of a higher value."

Kitsch is not simply bad taste, although there is nothing "simple" about that tantalizingly difficult concept. In Pazaurek's definition, "Kitsch" is the rubbish and opposite of fancy goods which are brainlessly manufactured and brainlessly consumed. No longer a term of condemnation for the cynical rubbish bought by uneducated consumers, kitsch was reinvented by an elite class, fatigued with the triumph of good manners represented by the "triumph" of the Modern movement. It was one front of the Uglification campaign that preoccupied opinion-formers in the arts. By the time Gillo Dorfles's 'An Anthology of Bad Taste' was published in 1968, Kitsch had been elevated to "radical chic". It was cool to enjoy and promote ugliness. Bernard Berenson declared that taste begins when appetite is gratified and the generation that re-took kitsch had been utterly sated on Modern movement politeness. A new generation admired what they self-consciously thought was bad. They agreed with Charles Baudelaire that bad taste was "intoxicating" because it suggested the aristocratic authority of not having to please. Kitsch is the artful, knowing and sly elevation of bad taste, but aspects of its shifting definition reveal some absolutes about ugliness. Someone once said it's the corpse that's left when anger goes out of art.

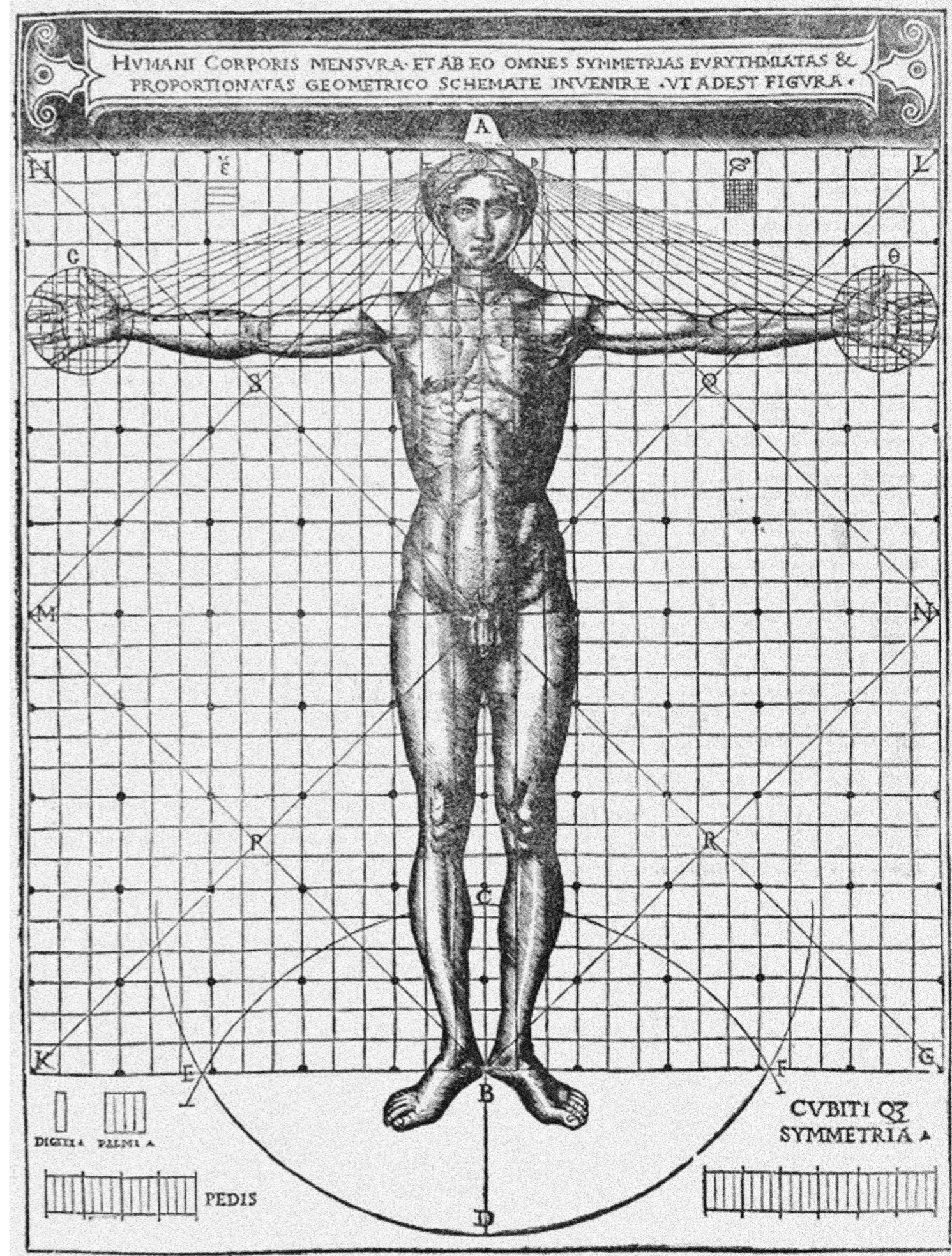
Measuring Ugliness

Can ugliness be measured mathematically?
Is science aesthetically neutral?

Science can detect, but cannot define descriptively, what it is that makes something disgusting. Science can tell us the name of a particular ugly quality, but can it describe it? For example, the ugly mixture of bad smell and bad taste that is "corked" wine - defined scientifically, it is 2,4,6 -trichloroanisole, or TCA, a fungoid compound, but this is not the most evocative of descriptions.

The emerging discipline of neuroesthetics promises scientific precision where before only culturally conditioned taste and prejudice operated. Neuroesthetics is a term coined by Semir Zeki, author of 'Inner Visions' (1999) and a neurosurgeon. The belief of Zeki, is that since our perceptions are based on the stimulated activity of neural mechanisms, responses to art can be tested experimentally. If this is so, then our taste is not the product of our acquired education or our inherited proclivities, but the inevitable and true result of electrical energy in the brain, responses to external stimuli. If the neuroesthetic proposition is valid, then ugliness is not a matter of dispute, it is a definable absolute.

Are there any universal ways in which people react to beauty? No, because beauty is detachment or absence of passion. Ugliness, by contrast, is passion. I can consider a thing to be beautiful even without feeling I must possess it. It seems, however, that ugliness does imply a passion--namely, disgust or repulsion. So how can there be an aesthetic judgment of ugliness if there is no possibility of detachment?



Created by: Cesare Cesariano (1483-1543)
Symmetry of the Human Body (First Vitruvian Man)

Created by: Thomas Hirschhorn
Too too much much, 2010, dimensions variable,
installation view, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens,
Deurle, Belgium, 2010



Context & Ugliness

Cultural representations of ugliness completely depends upon the context in terms of what we find ugly. Most of us would probably agree that if beauty is subjective then so is ugliness. It really depends upon your social class, your culture, your ethnicity, your gender and it's just a matter of taste in the end. One needs to understand their audience while judging an artwork. It also requires critical thinking about what we want that audience to do with what they are seeing. It's important to really interrogate things and to question why we feel that way and why we label things in a certain way. It doesn't mean we like it more, but it certainly adds meaning and makes it more interesting to know why something was done a certain way.

What makes certain designs appealing? Are aesthetics 100% subjective or is there any objectivity in it?

I believe that aesthetics are partly subjective and partly objective. My theory is that a lot of our innate conceptions of beauty comes from nature and from human survival instincts. The problem with aesthetics is that a lot of modern aesthetics is contrary to nature. There is an infinite variety of textures, curves, shapes, forms, which is visually enriching and pleasing to the human eye. It is therefore of my belief that true beauty isn't 100% symmetrical, isn't totally smooth, and youth isn't always the most beautiful thing. I think asymmetric compositions are far more elegant, interesting, dynamic, and epic.

Anything which humans consider as "art" is generally a human concept. You also don't need a majority consensus to validate something. Of course it is beneficial if multiple individuals agree on something, but your own approval as your own artworks as being art is good enough. If you're the person who totally goes against the grain in terms of "rules" in art, aesthetics, or life; you're the only black swan that needs to exist, to validate a brand new concept or idea!

Modernism , Mass-Production & Ugliness

The 19th century industrialized ugliness. Crimes of art were perpetrated with the same callous thoroughness of global warfare and greedy colonialism. Industry provided the means to mass-produce beauty, or, at least, an agreed version of it, but on the available evidence, ugliness was preferred. What does this tell us about human motivation and, indeed, human perversity?

Even in the 21st century, we are still struggling to come to terms with what industry has done to art and nature. For the first time in history, it was possible to manufacture large numbers of anything without necessarily bothering with taste or refinement.

Since the new consumers largely lacked education, taste and refinement were not really needed. Production and consumption were no longer the privilege of an elite but were opened up to all social classes. Somewhat depressingly, this led to generalized mediocrity rather than generalized excellence. Mass-produced goods have a weird character that is neither fake nor authentic.

The purity of Modernism represented a dead end, even if the Post-Modernists took a wrong turn in trying to avoid collision with a culminating full-stop. So designers eventually began to look for alternatives.

By 1990 the search criteria had been narrowed.

"We have to be bad. Not bad as in crap, but bad as in insubordinate and disobedient. If we're bad, we can be the aesthetic conscience of the business world. We can break the cycle of blandness. We can jam up the assembly line that puts out one dull, look-a-like piece of crap after another. We can say 'Why not do something with artistic integrity and ideological courage? We can say 'Why not do something that forces us to rewrite the definition of 'good design? Most of all, bad is about recapturing the idea that a designer is the representative - almost like a missionary of art, within the world of business. We're not here to give them what's safe and expedient. We're not here to eradicate everything of visual interest from the face of the Earth. We're here to make them think about design that's dangerous and unpredictable. We're here to inject art into commerce. We're here to be bad'".

-Tibor Kalman



Photo by: Ria Novosti,
Science Photo Library
Workers assembling Kamez diesel engine gear
boxes for trucks. This is the Kama Automobile
Works (KAMAZ), the world's largest truck
factory. It is located in Naberezhnye Chelny,
Tatarstan, Russia.

Commercial Ugliness

Is ugliness a deterrent to success? Is beauty the driver of modern business? Commercial advertising shouldn't be obnoxious. Propaganda is a type of advertising, and it can undoubtedly be ugly; in fact, that is frequently its intention: to convince and dissuade through animosity and negativism. However, propaganda is solely concerned with ideas and not with money. Advertising, on the other hand, absorbs traditional notions of beauty and regurgitates them in order to sell commodities and services.

The exceptions prove the rule. Oliviero Toscani became so fatigued by the visual clichés of lustrous perfection glistening on the cars shown in modern advertising, never scarred by guano or road muck, that he created a radical series of ads for Benetton which did not even show the garments the company was selling. Instead, they showed blood- and mucus-mired newborn, a bullet-riddled garment, an albino African. Calculated to affront, Toscani's Benetton ads became some of the most celebrated, or, at least, the most discussed, of all time. A primary assumption of advertising, to seduce by beauty, to stimulate desire by perfect form, had been transgressed.

Andy Warhol's career as an art director made mass media and gallery art, kitsch, and camp indistinguishable from each other. Dismayed, perhaps by the number of Warhol's followers who mistook his irony for career advice, Brian Eno wrote: *"The big challenge for artists today is to produce work sufficiently ugly it cannot be appropriated for advertising"*.

UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.



Photo by: Franco Zecchini/Magnum
S/S 1992, "Murder"
An ad campaign by Benetton created by
Oliviero Toscani

Photo by: Hans Bethlem
The most unappealing car model of BMW, Isetta
600 in Amsterdam in 1955



Ugliness has now been appropriated by the automobile industry. When this happens, all aesthetic definitions are up for reappraisal. When the BMW 7 Series was launched in 2001 it was almost universally condemned as “ugly” because of its weird proportions and deformed aspects.

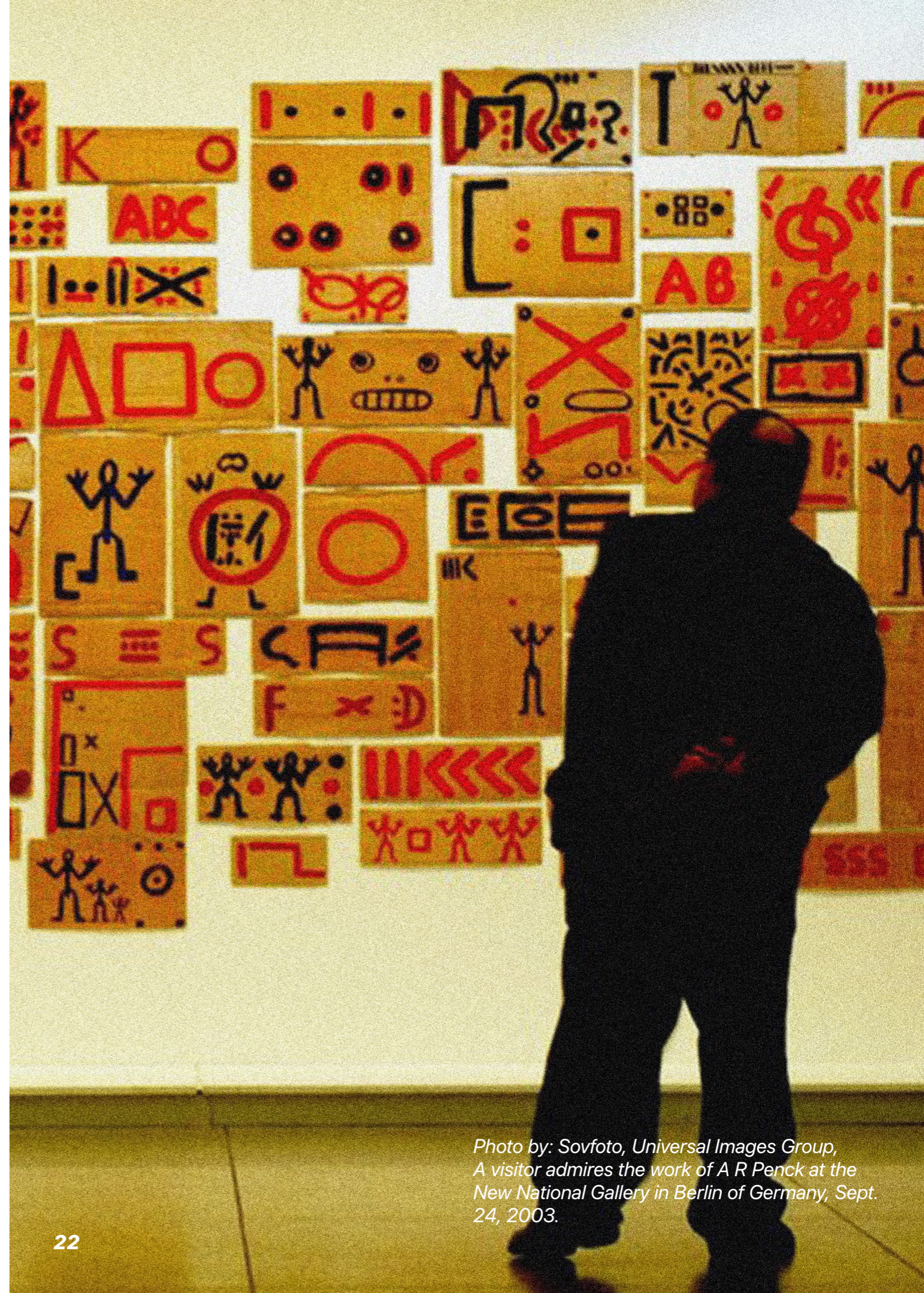
When asked why he had created so obviously a “challenging” shape, BMW’s Adrian van Hooydonk replied: *“It’s very hard to control everybody’s perceptions. We always want to do cars that create an emotional response. If you want to avoid all negative criticism, do something boring. I do believe in beauty. And proportion is terribly important to the realization of it. We don’t have a rule book. I believe it would limit creativity. But you must not give people what they want. It’s not a science project”*.

One central belief of the twentieth century was that beauty could be democratized. So an artificial paradise of industrial perfection could replace the natural paradise which the very same industry had destroyed. It was a central belief that people wanted beauty. Maybe they did and maybe they still do. So it is a significant moment in the history of art when Adrian van Hooydonk, one of the most influential designers in the world, says he wants to withhold the beauty which his consumers are assumed to crave.

Artistic Ugliness

There's a sense of brazenness to unintentionally bad art; it embodies desire gone awry. And being able to enjoy ugly art isn't simply about making fun of it. It's also about being able to sit in discomfort and recognize mistakes. Ugly art demands a sense of looseness; it asks you to dip into a slippery state of mind where you can hold multiple beliefs simultaneously. The piece can be both ugly and unappealing, and it can also delight and appeal for those very reasons. It can pull you closer; it makes you want to know why this ugly art was made, what it means, and what the artists were thinking. And if you let yourself get unbalanced enough, you might just find yourself a little bit in love.

Sometimes ugliness frees the imagination. But measured against the apotheosis of the beautiful, ugliness may have a disruptive effect on an orderly composition unless it can be shaped into an enhancement. As a method of contrast, ugliness can be positioned to enhance beauty. And ugliness can disappear into the paradoxes of ambiguity. But ugliness can also be entirely accidental, a flaw that has no purpose other than to stand as proof of imperfection and so becomes deliberate only in retrospect.



*Photo by: Sovfoto, Universal Images Group,
A visitor admires the work of A R Penck at the
New National Gallery in Berlin of Germany, Sept.
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Created by: Jan Miense Molenaer
Cabaret scene: the taste. Four persons employed swallow food and drink.





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