

30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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**THE  
INVISIBLE  
DRAGON**

*Essays on Beauty  
and Other Matters*

**DAVE HICKEY**

EDITED AND WITH AN AFTERWORD BY GARY KORNBLAU

LOVE ME, ADMIRE ME,  
BOW DOWN BEFORE ME,  
PAY ME FOR BEING  
WHAT I AM — BEAUTIFUL.

DAVE HICKEY IN "NUMBERS"

ART ISSUES PRESS / LOS ANGELES

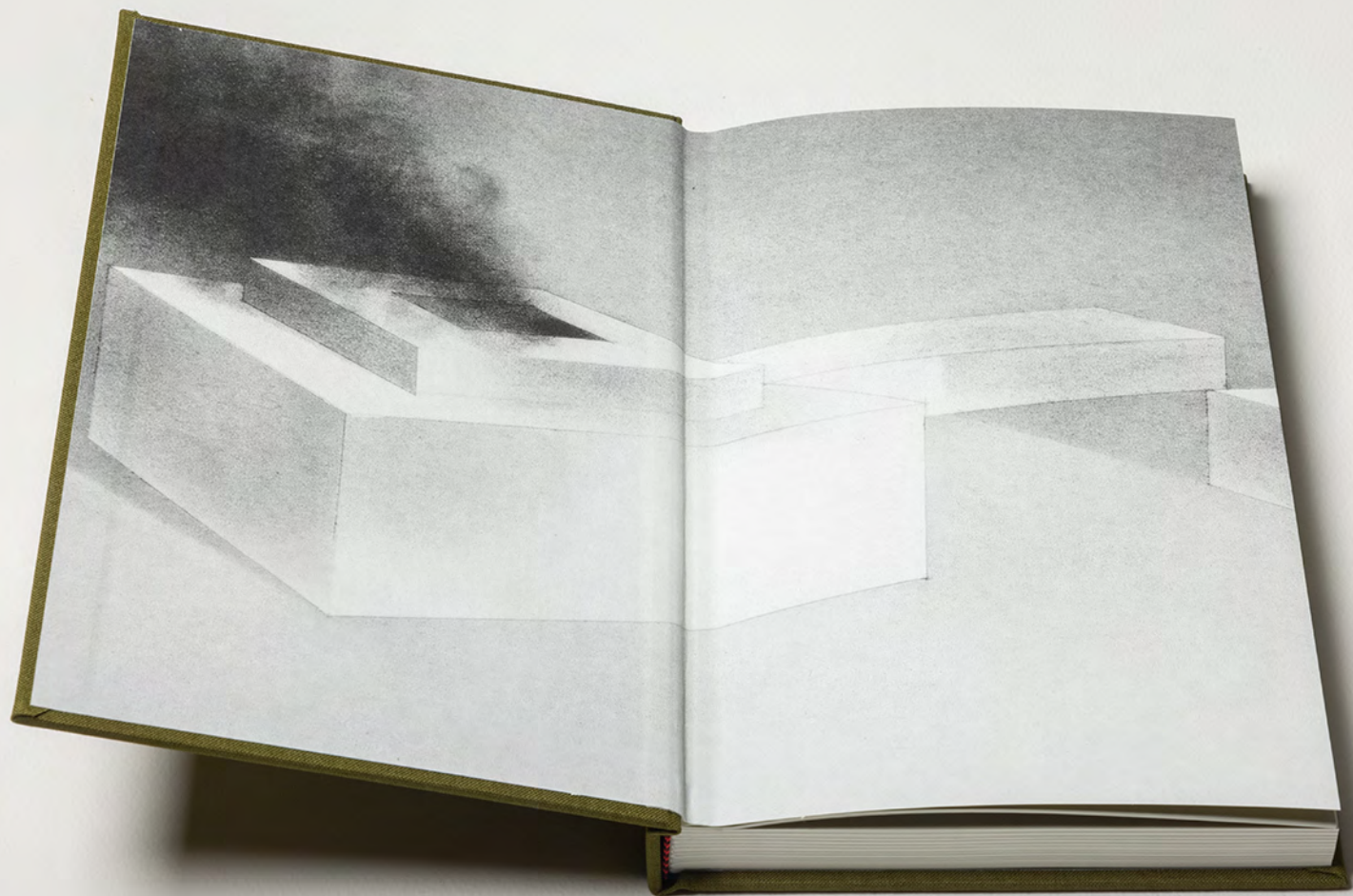
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\* *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, 1993

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THE IDEA WAS TO  
TALK TO HER ABOUT  
BEING A WOMAN  
IN MACHO NASHVILLE,  
BUT IT'S ALREADY  
OBVIOUS THAT  
INTERVIEWING THAT  
DOLLY PARTON ON  
THE PROBLEMS  
OF BEING A FEMALE  
COUNTRY SINGER  
IS LIKE INTERVIEWING  
A ROLLS ROYCE  
ON THE PROBLEMS  
OF BEING A CAR.

Dave Hickey

## DOLLY TRIUMPHANT!

COUNTRY MUSIC, 1974

When the show was over, the curtain closed and the crowd stood up, but it didn't leave. The promoters set up a long table in front of the stage, and when it was ready, Porter Wagoner, Dolly Parton, and Speck Rhodes came out and sat behind it, as nearly two thousand people formed a misshapen but orderly line to pass by. These weren't flashy people, just folks from in and around Joplin, Missouri: farm families numbering in the teens; couples: she, semiformal, he, in his service station uniform (*Jim Bob* stitched above the pocket); local honchos in roping boots, felt Stetsons covering army haircuts; preteen girls with disastrous complexions and autograph books; housewives, alone, in bouffant and pantsuits; old couples. They all filed slowly past the table, extending whatever they had to sign.

The people walked away clutching their autographs with strange smiles on their faces, especially the men. Since I had received one of Dolly's smiles earlier in the evening, I knew



THE TWISTED DRAGON



CARAVAGGIO  
Madonna of the Rosary, 1607  
Oil on canvas  
143 1/2 x 98 inches  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna  
photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

ENTER THE DRAGON

it not somehow expedited that agenda? I doubt it. We are a litigious civilization and we do not like losers. The history of beauty, like all history, tells the winner's tale, and that tale is told in the great mausoleums where images like Caravaggio's, having done their work in the world, are entombed — and where, even hanging in state, they provide us with a ravishing and poignant visual experience. One wonders, however, whether our standards for the pleasures of art are well founded in the glamorous tristesse we feel in the presence of these institutionalized warhorses — whether contemporary images are really enhanced by being interned in a museum at birth and attended as one might a movie, whether there might not be work for them to do in the world among the living.

For more than four centuries, the idea of "making it beautiful" has been the keystone of our cultural vernacular — the lover's machine gun and the prisoner's joy — the last redoubt of the disenfranchised and the single direct route, without a detour through church or state, from the image to the individual. Now that lost generosity, like Banquo's ghost, is doomed to haunt our discourse about contemporary art — no longer required to recommend images to our attention or to insinuate them into vernacular memory, no longer welcome even to try. The route from image to beholder now detours through an alternate institution, ostensibly distinct from church and state. Even so, it is not hard to detect the aroma of Caravaggio's priests as one treads its gray wool carpets or cools one's heels in its arctic waiting rooms. One must suspect, I think, that we are being denied the direct appeal of beauty for much the same reason that Caravaggio's supplicants were denied direct appeal to the Virgin: to sustain the jobs of bureaucrats. Caravaggio, at least, *shows* us the Virgin, in all her gorgeous autonomy, before instructing us not to look

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Dave Hickey

THE INVETERATE DRAWER

Which called to mind his early painting, *SU*. Was it pronounced "sue" or "see" or "pleaser"? The phrase, being to do as this point would have been to call him "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser". I do not know what I intended to do, but instead I began drawing the letters of the word "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser" in the style of the book, *Chaucer's Abridgement*, and took it to be an allusion to "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser" in the sense of "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser". I do not know what I intended to do, but instead I began drawing the letters of the word "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser" in the style of the book, *Chaucer's Abridgement*, and took it to be an allusion to "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser" in the sense of "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser".

What I did not do on that afternoon was to do anything else. I do not know what I intended to do, but instead I began drawing the letters of the word "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser" in the style of the book, *Chaucer's Abridgement*, and took it to be an allusion to "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser" in the sense of "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser". I do not know what I intended to do, but instead I began drawing the letters of the word "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser" in the style of the book, *Chaucer's Abridgement*, and took it to be an allusion to "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser" in the sense of "Sue" or "see" or "pleaser".

WACKY MOLIÈRE LINES



Ed Ruscha  
*SU*, 1961  
Oil on paper  
6 1/4 x 8 1/4 inches  
© Ed Ruscha

**8.** In this way Rechy has radically activated the entire literary experience and questioned its ethical, moral, and aesthetic foundations. For many years, there has been a dictum in criticism that we should avoid what W. K. Wimsatt calls the "intentional fallacy" of imputing the artist's motives. What Rechy's book demonstrates, and everyone knew all along, is that by ignoring the artist's motives for making a book, we also can ignore our own motives for reading it. We can purify our motives by deifying the book, but in doing so we perform what Karl Marx realized was the classic gesture of bourgeois capitalism: we make a "fetish" out of a commodity and give it a value totally dissociated from the labor that produced it. Speaking as a Jew and not an economist, Marx might have put it another way: he would call us idolatrous — and he would be right. If Johnny Rio presents his body to be worshipped by men who say "they want love but really only want sex — the raw sensation of safe relationship with a cute and undemanding "number" (his second novel, his third, . . .) — and if John Rechy presents his book to us with an identical gesture and we pay for it and take it home for a "safe" experience in the "wonderful world of books," then there is no way to call Rechy's gesture vain without calling ours hypocritical. (I say there is no way, but as might have been expected, the *Partisan Review* has found a way.)<sup>10</sup>

**9.** The interplay of fictional gesture and literary experience would not be nearly so effective, though, if Rechy, having presented himself to be admired, gave us what we desired, as Johnny Rio, in the necessity of his vanity, must do. Rechy, on the other hand, uses the primary mimetic device of the novel to destroy the mimesis, and the primary formal device to destroy the form. Again, I believe that Rechy has done something subtle

and new. Traditionally, the novelist has accepted two contrary intentions when he begins making a book. He intends to make a work of art, which has order and therefore fulfills our expectations, and he intends to imitate or represent everyday life, which doesn't have order and therefore doesn't fulfill our expectations. His primary device to give his book order was the plot, which ordered events in a causal chain leading to a conclusion; his primary device to imitate everyday life was the novel's scale, which by its sheer size implied a period of time we read in one sitting, when we read something over a period of time we have forgotten most of it is a part of our subconscious memory, its entirety. But this is a tremendous mimetic device: before the book is finished, most of it is a part of our subconscious memory, a part of our actual past, so the author can literally make the reader "remember" events in the book as he would events in his life. What Rechy does is give us a plot that is suddenly transformed into an anti-plot and give us fictional events of such similarity and rapidity that the ordering, mythologizing function of our memory is frustrated. And so the book becomes like the plot, and the chapters, numbers.

**10.** When Johnny Rio returns to Los Angeles, he hits the streets again to "test" himself. He is successful, but so he sets a number of homosexuals he will passively seduce: 30 (American for the end of youth; journalism for the end of a text). As his trek begins he keeps count, trying to remember each conquest. He moves from the streets, to Muscle Beach, to MacArthur Park, and finally to Griffith Park, gathering his

THE INVINCIBLE DRAGON



Giovanni Bellini  
Christ Blessing, 1468, circa 1500  
Tempera, oil, and gold on panel  
29 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches  
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

FROM NIGHT IN FLATLAND



Diego Velázquez  
Don Pedro de Barberana, circa 1631-33  
Oil on canvas  
79 x 43 7/8 inches  
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

written edict that came down from the bishop on behalf of the prince, ordering a work to be executed by Fra Angelico and outlining its materials and iconography — and we may possess the receipt for that work signed by the artist himself — but the documentation of that receipt, footnoted in a written work of art history and accompanied by a photographic reproduction of the object, tells us nothing about the textured circumstances of the work's creation or survival.

The single, irrefutable, indisputable fact — the thing we know and cannot document — is that somewhere, in the beginning, in some conversation room or cloister, two or three commissioners present in conversation, each for his own reasons and each with his own aesthetic, political, and theological agendas, decided that Fra Angelico, rather than some other Fra, should paint a predella depicting Saint James. We know, as well, that subsequent to its making, thoughtful observers stood before Fra Angelico's creation and found it worthy, found it useful to their purposes, and said so to one another. We know further that young artists, priests, in the studio and in the refectory, decided in conversation that what Fra Angelico had done was "radical," that it was worth emulating and surpassing.

And we know, finally, because the work still lives among us in a vitrine in the Kimbell Art Museum on the edge of the prairie, that what Fra Angelico had done was worth preserving, and so worth emulating and surpassing.

And we know, later, after the faithful and thoughtful conversationalists were dead, subsequent conversations about it was again and again, subsequent conversations that held us in sway — come and go. They rise to power then fade into dust and archives, but the conversation goes on, and, as



Fra Angelico  
The Abbot Saint James the Greater Freeing the  
Magnific Hermogenes, circa 1426–29  
Tempera and gold on panel  
10 1/4 x 9 1/4 inches  
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

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I WAS BEGINNING TO REALIZE,  
MOST UNWILLINGLY, ALL  
THE THINGS LOVE COULD NOT  
DO. IT COULD NOT MAKE ME OVER,  
FOR EXAMPLE. IT COULD NOT  
UNDO THE JOURNEY WHICH HAD  
MADE ME SUCH A STRANGE  
MAN AND BROUGHT ME TO SUCH  
A STRANGE PLACE.

James Bullock  
Nobody Knows My Name

AFTERWORD  
**THE BALLAD OF BILLY  
AND OSCAR  
AND DAVE AND ME**

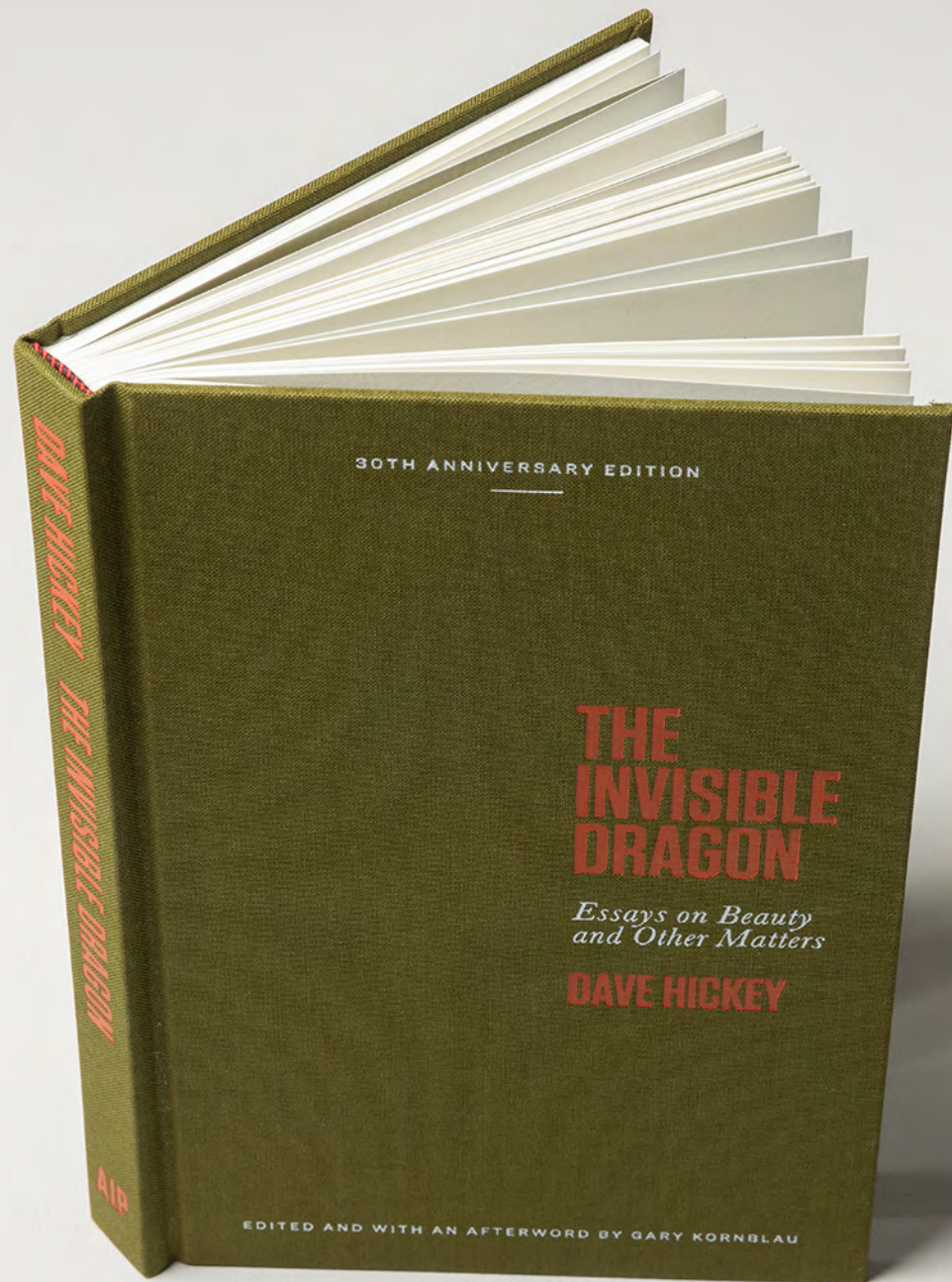
Colt Anand

*From The Phoenix*  
I remember our initial conversation. It was the summer of 2003, and I was publishing my magazine *Art Issues*, out of the makeshift quarters shed next to my small hangar in Hollywood. I was looking for writers. Christopher Knight, a friend and art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, said I should check out Dave Hines, whose name and wit might be a good fit. I rang Dave on a hotline, about art and music, and he asked what I liked. Dave spoke to this "older man." (What we learn in life!) We I was put on the spot, and we needed to find a mutual were feeling each other out, and we had shared interests: him, a straight-shooting, straight renegade from West Texas with a troubled and nomadic childhood who had grown up after the Second World War, and me, a gay effeminate Jew from

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