

Feminism and Aesthetics

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Distinguishing Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art

Aesthetics is sometimes considered synonymous with the philosophy of art (or the arts). However, aesthetics is a field within philosophy – generally regarded as a more recent area of study beginning in the eighteenth century – involving theories of perception that focus on the apprehension of beauty and other qualities of intrinsic value. The objects of such study may or may not be works of art. Indeed, examples from the world of nature as well as mathematic proofs were originally offered as appropriate objects of study in aesthetics, each of which offered its own type of beauty.

The philosophy of art, in contrast, dates back to the theories of Plato and his interest in the nature of creativity and art objects, their value and social role, and their power to form character and convey knowledge, but it can also refer to twentieth-century concerns and debates over art's expressiveness, its emphasis on formalism, its increasingly transgressive nature, the interpretation of artists' intentions, and its evaluation: both within and outside the recognized mainstream US, New York-centered artworld. Not surprisingly, the two areas of aesthetics and philosophy of art can converge, and more recently, have come to overlap with new areas of investigation like critical studies and cultural studies which expand our interests beyond a familiar canon of artifacts to the broader ascription of meaning to all types of cultural products, whether considered art or not.

Since the 1970s, established women artists – as well as women working in creative arenas previously considered crafts – have helped to facilitate a blurring of boundaries between aesthetics and the philosophy of art. Quilts, created to honor families and their histories, along with fabric artworks and painted china plates, helped erode entrenched distinctions between fine art and craft, high art and low, men's art and women's. Responses to artworks previously deemed purely aesthetic were reassessed as containing non-aesthetic components. Moreover, feminists suggested that non-aesthetic qualities – previously demarcated contextual quali-

ties that involved ethics, politics, or history and were considered extraneous to the work of art – were indeed relevant, and perhaps even necessary, to a full and fair interpretation and evaluation. In addition to the elevated status of new and unusual media, women artists redirected the male-defined trajectory of performance art toward their own female bodies to explore issues of sexuality (Carolee Schneeman’s nude performance with live snakes comes to mind, exhibiting ties to small sculptures of Minoan snake goddesses from the seventeenth century BCE), organic links to nature (for example, Ana Mendieta’s body imprints upon the earth and carved cave walls), gender and racial roles within society (Adrian Piper’s public street persona as a black man with Afro), and aesthetic surgery (the numerous aesthetic surgeries of the French performance artist, Orlan, intent on showing the futility of women seeking male-defined ideals of beauty). Although not directly engaged in a dialogue with philosophers, these artists were repeatedly challenging deeply held traditions of the concepts of “art” and “aesthetic experience” as they had been defined by white, European or American, middle- to upper-class, self-proclaimed men of taste; men who considered women’s proper role to be restricted to appearing in art, not creators of art.

Bringing Feminist Theory into Aesthetics

Essays citing connections between feminism and aesthetics are relatively few in the larger literature of aesthetics. There are several overviews of the field that encapsulate the interplay of feminist theorizing and aesthetics; for some philosophers, this area of research has come to be known as “feminist aesthetics” while for others, resistant to the phrase, the preferred wording is simply “feminism and aesthetics”) (Brand 1998; Worth 1998; Devereaux 2003; Korsmeyer 2004b; Eaton 2005). But there are still many scholarly works and survey texts that contain no reference to feminism at all. Why? Perhaps because the philosophical exploration of the role of women in the history of art, the gendering of historical concepts promoted by figures like Kant, and the crossover of feminist art criticism and theory, have been introduced only recently into analytic aesthetics. Its acceptance into the mainstream has been slow and difficult.

A variety of reasons account for this, not the least of which are ones that are social (there are still far fewer women than men in aesthetics, as in philosophy in general, and women generally author feminist research), conceptual (a resistance to scholarship that focuses on gender, race, or class in favor of a purely aesthetic approach to the discussion of works of art), and ideological (insistence on further exploration and teaching of the well-established canon, or core, of philosophical literature, considered “real” aesthetics). What is the history and current role of feminism and how has it fared within the continually expansive field of philosophical aesthetics and philosophy of the arts?

Consider the fact that the first special issues of academic philosophy journals in

English devoted to feminism were *The Monist* and *Philosophical Forum* (both in 1973). Feminist research in complementary fields to the arts such as art history, criticism, and theory, also began at this time, most notably jump-started with the query posed by Linda Nochlin in her famous 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1988). Many previously unknown women artists of the past five centuries were slowly brought to light by art historians (Tufts 1975; Harris and Nochlin 1976; Peterson and Wilson 1976; Chadwick 2002). The reclamation of artists from obscurity naturally inspired questions about their disappearance and omission from standard art history texts (their omission lasted into the early 1980s), prompting a whole new phase of theoretical inquiry. Marked by intense analysis of the social conditions surrounding the creativity and production of women who were well-known in their day – many with significant patrons, paid commissions, and studios staffed with apprentices – feminist scholars sought to understand the lost stature and obscurity of these accomplished artists. These texts in art history and art theory, along with the experiences and artwork of women artists, were to become the foundation of feminist philosophical inquiry within aesthetics.

Linguistic analyses, sociological hypotheses, and cross-cultural comparisons came into focus as the first collection of feminist art-historical essays, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, sought to distinguish itself from standard catalogues and monographs by examining “Western art history and the extent to which it has been distorted, in every major period, by sexual bias” (Broude and Garrard 1982: 1). New research sought to collapse stereotypes about women artists through texts with such intriguing titles such as, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (Greer 1979), *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (Parker and Pollock 1981), *Get the Message? A Decade of Art For Social Change* (Lippard 1984), and *Art and Sexual Politics: Women’s Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History* (Hess and Baker 1973). The feminist critique greatly expanded in the 1970s and 1980s and writers brought nuanced investigation to aspects of gender in the arts that had never been previously considered; for example, Christine Battersby’s objection to the notion of exclusively male provenance of “genius” (1989), Naomi Schor’s insights into the category of details in art and literature which she argued constituted an aesthetic category typically considered feminine (1987), and – in a more self-reflexive phase of commentary upon the feminist critique itself – Rita Felski’s questioning of the use of the concepts “masculine” and “feminine” as a methodology of analysis in isolation from the social conditions of their production and reception (1989).

Similarly, a burgeoning interest in the creative work of women writers, filmmakers, and composers arose and achieved a secure hold within the disciplines of literary theory, film studies, and musicology. Non-American writers, such as Sylvia Bovenschen in West Germany (1985, whose original essay was published in 1976), and French writers Luce Irigaray (1974/1985) and Julia Kristeva (1982), were writing about the unique qualities of the female sex and the way gender affected the explanations of creativity, expression, and interpretation in the arts. This Euro-

pean trend of focusing on the experiences and achievements of women in the arts paralleled feminist scholarship in American philosophical fields such as ethics, social-political philosophy, philosophy of law, the philosophy of science, the history of philosophy, metaphysics, and epistemology. Yet philosophical aesthetics during the 1970s and 1980s remained silent on issues of gender.

Developing Feminist Challenges to Aesthetics

Feminist writing within the field of American academic aesthetics did not appear until nearly twenty years after Nochlin's famous essay, when a special issue on aesthetics entitled, "Feminism and Aesthetics," appeared in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (Hein and Korsmeyer 1990), the same year as a special issue, "Feminism and Traditional Aesthetics," of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Brand and Korsmeyer 1990). British co-authors Penny Florence and Nicola Foster presented an overview of the literature in the UK (1998; 2000a; 2000b), noting the absence of feminist research within *The British Journal of Aesthetics* throughout its entire publication history. Thus, in spite of rising international interests in women's artistic creativity and a growing interest in feminist inquiry within American philosophy, the introduction of feminism as a serious topic within American and British aesthetics has lagged far behind their feminist counterparts. One explanation cites the strong resistance by analytic aestheticians to any viewpoint not embodying the complex notion of disinterestedness, i.e., the perceiver's shunning of interests – whether ethical, political, religious, economic, ecological, etc. It is worth examining this legacy from the eighteenth century in some depth since it has had an impact that has been both broad and lasting.

A common five-part structure adopted by empiricist philosophers in Britain set the tone for two centuries of thinking that focused on a person's aesthetic experience, particularly the experience of beauty. The first component was perception: the mode whereby one knows the objects in the world and their characteristics. The second was the faculty of taste, a concept that varied among the members of the group, with Joseph Addison vaguely casting it as imagination and Francis Hutcheson describing it as an internal sense of beauty. This sense – like one's external senses – is automatically triggered within a split second of the act of perception. It is prescribed to be free of interest, i.e., unimpeded by any "feeling to what farther advantage or detriment the use of such objects might tend" (Hutcheson 1977: 573). The third component of the theory of taste is the mental product resulting from the reaction of the faculty of taste, generally understood to be pleasure (free of desire and the will to possess). The fourth structural part is the kind of object (or event, such as a theatrical performance) in the perceived world under consideration that contained certain special characteristics (aesthetic properties) that imbue the object with intrinsic value. For Hutcheson, the object was said to possess uniformity amidst variety; for Edmund Burke, qualities of smoothness

and smallness. The fifth and final structural part is one's judgment of taste such as, "This painting is beautiful," which functions as a capstone to the entire process.

Feminist philosophers have been highly skeptical of male art viewers who reported or advocated a neutral response of pleasure – particularly when gazing upon a depiction of a sensuous, erotically charged beautiful woman. Feminists have detected inconsistencies and fallacies in the empiricist proscription for disinterestedness and have challenged the rigid distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic qualities by intentionally integrating contextual factors, e.g., social, ethical, and political, into the meaning and appraisal of art. It is worth noting that mainstream philosophers in the late 1990s have come to embrace such connections between aesthetics and ethics, yet with no acknowledgment of feminist writings (Levinson 1998).

In further challenges to canonical writings in aesthetics, feminists have given new readings of traditional theories of taste, beauty, and sublimity that exposed purportedly neutral and universal concepts. They have challenged David Hume's classic standard of taste – possessed solely by white, educated males who were well-practiced in the arts – and have questioned Kant's universal judgments of beauty by delving into basic assumptions about human nature used to legitimize masculine rational faculties and belittle feminine wiles. They have questioned the hierarchy of aesthetic responses by which the empiricists ranked the sublime (considered masculine) over the beautiful (feminine), exposing further bias. Carolyn Korsmeyer has provided an unusual analysis of taste that revisits the empirical notion of the eighteenth century but also expands into previously uncharted territory, namely, that of taste involving the physical senses of smell, sight, and gustatory delights (1999).

Numerous publications have established feminism's fragile foothold within philosophical aesthetics. Two books were published as expanded versions of the two initial 1990 journal publications, *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective* (Hein and Korsmeyer 1993) and *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (Brand and Korsmeyer 1995). The first volume grew out of a special issue of a feminist philosophy journal and as such, presupposed an audience familiar with feminist ideas and methodology. It debates (among other things) the question initially posed by Sylvia Bovenschen in 1976, namely, that of a feminine – versus a feminist – aesthetic. In this volume, Hilde Hein issues a call for the study of aesthetics within feminist philosophy. Several authors in the volume seek to undermine philosophy's continuing preference for aesthetic/formalist properties over non-aesthetic. Other authors take on the task of examining the cognitive makeup of the artist within her socio-political context, for example, her race or sexuality, and the role such factors play in the assessment of art.

The second volume, *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, presupposed an audience of philosophers trained in analytic aesthetics with no familiarity with feminist research, methodology, or related fields of feminist inquiry, whether in the arts or feminist philosophy generally. Situating newly arrived feminist scholarship within the broader context of historical philosophical writing about the arts in the

analytic tradition, feminism is cast as yet another challenge to the traditions of the past, quite similar, in fact, to the mid-twentieth-century backlash of analytic philosophers who defied the essentialism of their predecessors insistence on defining “art” and upholding past standards of beauty. Essays range from critical analyses of historical concepts to interpretive strategies of various art forms, and incorporate viewpoints atypical of traditional aesthetics, such as that of a black female spectator, a Vietnamese film-maker, a woman with disabilities, and a mother analyzing myths involving mothers and daughters. Given the emphasis on gender and race in the creativity and appreciation of the arts, feminists in this volume mount a dual-pronged challenge to both the canon of esteemed artworks and its unquestioned foundation for philosophical inquiry throughout the centuries. The feminist critique in this collection poses a meta-critical challenge to all that had come before: an acceptance of the art historical canon that sought to explain, without question, the aesthetic value attributed to “great” works of art.

Ongoing research in the fields of feminist art history, art criticism, and theory serve to reinforce feminist philosophers’ claims that a new – revisionist – art history is being established, that feminist scholarship has posed difficult questions that need to be answered, and that analytic aesthetics can no longer ignore the cultural and historical context (factors like gender, race, and class) of a work of art.

The Role of Women Artists in Feminist Aesthetics

Women artists of the day, beginning in the early 1970s, have been crucial to the feminist effort to establish women as serious contenders in the highly competitive, male-dominated artworld and as newly established paradigms within feminist philosophy of art. Moving beyond women artists of the past, feminist art critics and theorists highlighted their contemporaries with a focus that coincided with a nationwide surge in new, cooperative women’s galleries and published art journals (most of which are no longer with us). The content of feminist art became part of an agenda of women artists and writers to promote a message for social change, subversion of the patriarchy, and more equality for all women, including minorities (Piper 1996; Farris-Dufrene 1997). The writings of Judy Chicago provided insights into an artist’s psyche and motivation for over thirty years (Chicago 1996) while the influence of the first decades of women’s art began to come more clearly into focus (Broude and Garrard 1994). Feminists across the Atlantic celebrated their own artists, with some authors initiating new forms of feminist art criticism (Deepwell 1995) and others stepping back to assess the big picture and take stock of how far they had come as a separate, though inter-related field of study (Robinson 2001).

As women looked around – at themselves and at their peers still marginalized within the dominant artworld – a growing sense of sarcasm and humor took hold that served to organize and embolden a group of women who organized

themselves under the name of Guerilla Girls (Isaak 1996). Beginning in the 1985, artworld inequities have been publicized by means of witty posters freely circulated around New York City that used humor and irreverence to express the sentiments of the self-proclaimed “conscience of culture” (Hoban 2004). Always anonymous and adopting names of deceased women artists like Kathe Kollwitz and Frida Kahlo, the Girls have published books, sold T-shirts, and distributed information on gender and racial inequities in the worlds of art, theater, film, politics, and the culture at large (1998; 2003). The Girls always appear in public wearing gorilla masks (to focus on the issues rather than their personalities) and, according to their website, use humor “to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny.” They book tours and appearances across the country, and proclaim their project of “reinventing the ‘F word’ – feminism.” Comparing themselves to “the mostly male tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Batman, and the Lone Ranger,” they have been known to ask pointed questions that beg for answers, for example, in their latest publication on art museums: “Why do they blow a fortune on a single painting by a white male genius when they could acquire hundreds of great works by women and people of color instead?” (2004)

Feminist Philosophers Reflect on Self-Portraiture and Women as Objects of Beauty

Feminist scholarship affecting philosophical writing has developed in at least two specific areas worth noting here. One is the realm of self-portraiture that typically involves the use of the female body, e.g., in performance art; the second is a tangential interest in the depiction of women as objects of beauty, in defiance of a tradition established by male artists for over two millennia in which women have been cast as passive, available, and willing sources of sexual satisfaction and pleasure. Women have used their own bodies to challenge the historical hold and power of male artists over the female body, taking ownership and control over depictions of themselves, from a profoundly distinct woman’s point of view. One might even consider the 1940s flower paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe, often interpreted as visual metaphors of women’s sexual organs, as a precursor of this interest. This introspection on the part of women artists, in turn, has refocused feminist critics on women’s self-representation (Borzello 1998), with artist Judy Chicago and co-author Edward Lucie-Smith dubbing the volatile subject matter of the female body “contested territory” (1999).

Feminist philosophers have come to direct their attention to these artists and their self-depictions as well, as evidenced by a number of essays appearing in a recent special issue of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* entitled, “Women, Art, and Aesthetics” (Brand and Devereaux 2003). This collection is designed as a form of self-study, a review and appraisal of how far feminism had come in

thirteen years in the field of philosophical aesthetics since the initial 1990 publication of *Hypatia*. Gauging the progress in the intervening years, it reflects the tenor of the times – a new century, a new millennium. A considerable portion of this publication is devoted to seeing the work of women artists such as Adrian Piper, Jenny Saville, and Renée Cox in new ways: to highlight women’s experiences as the core of artistic expression and evaluative criticism. In this volume, art critic Eleanor Heartney uses the prism of the Catholic imagination to understand the controversial works of Janine Antoni, who mops the floor of a gallery with her hair doused in paint. Michelle Meager formulates a feminist aesthetics of disgust to explain the oversized nudes of the amply endowed bodies painted by Jenny Seville. And Joanna Frueh introduces the radical notion of beauty in vaginal aesthetics as a means to offset the typical evaluation of the female sex organs as ugly and repulsive.

The attention women have paid to their own bodies and the artistic depiction of themselves has helped usher in the resurgence of interest in beauty in the 1990s by the mainstream artworld, although male critics never acknowledged as much (Brand 2000). Feminist scholars have concentrated on new uses of the female body in subverting past conventions of beauty. Wendy Steiner has sought to explain a phenomenon she dubbed “Venus in exile” – the distortion or submersion of images of women in the twentieth century consistent with abstract artists’ rejection of beauty (2001), while earlier Francette Pacteau proposed psychoanalytic explanations for the symptom of beauty (1994). Joanna Frueh (herself the artist under discussion) has undertaken an exploration of “Monster/Beauty” and its relation to body-building and love (2001). The impact of white standards of beauty impressed upon artists and writers that African-Americans must negotiate an additional level of *moral* meaning below the surface level of aesthetic meaning of appearances and representations (Rooks 1996). Feminist philosophers have quickly joined in discussions of race and gender that have defined the vanguard of feminist art criticism, thereby adding a unique perspective that has drawn upon their knowledge and unique philosophical mode of investigation.

For instance, Cynthia Freeland poses the standard philosophical question, “But is it Art?” by confronting controversial works by women involving beauty and blood (2001). In *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women’s Agency*, Diana Meyers probes the crucial roles played by agency and self-knowledge for women caught within a society of patriarchal imagery, beauty-obsessed advertising, and pressures – from both sexes – to conform to unrealistic standards of bodily perfection (2002). Ann Cahill revisits the philosophical proscription on interested pleasure by reclaiming female pleasures based in community experiences and rituals of feminine beautification (2003). Richard Shusterman proposes a pragmatist reading of Simone de Beauvoir’s view of the body, one in which the body and its senses are the locus of aesthetics’ feelings and pleasures (2003). Sheila Lintott unleashes the notion of Kant’s sublime to explicate the phenomenon of eating disorders within the context of our society’s long-standing cult of thinness that functions as an ideal of beauty (2003).

Future Developments

Substantially furthering feminist scholarship in philosophical aesthetics, Carolyn Korsmeyer's informative text, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*, is the first comprehensive introduction to the field. It casts the net of philosophical aesthetics even more widely by probing into new topics like disgust, the abject, and the pernicious realm of "deep gender," which she casts as "gendered thinking operating at its most tenacious and subterranean level" below seemingly innocuous statements that "on the surface" appear to be "innocent and neutral" (Korsmeyer 2004a: 3). A virtual cornucopia of disciplines are covered and brought together under the umbrella of inquiry that places gender first and foremost in the careful analysis of artists, artworks, and artistic reception. Familiar topics are revisited but the approach is new, fresh, and all-encompassing.

What does the future hold? One prescient suggestion was proposed by Estella Lauter in her call for feminists to create a truly interdisciplinary discourse to avert a future "crisis" in aesthetics; her plan involves

an international conference that invites all interested feminist parties to a philosophical debate with all sorts of aestheticians over the nature of aesthetic experience, political engagement in art, theory, difference, opposition, and many other material or nonmaterial issues that may or may not be related differentially at present.

(Lauter 2003: 282)

Also looking to the future, Brand and Devereaux (2003) recommend more attention be paid to two important areas still relatively untouched. The first is the history of aesthetics itself. With the observation that feminists have shown little interest in the history of their discipline, they have issued a call for more scholarship on historical figures like Plato and Aristotle as well as neglected topics like medieval theories of beauty, but more importantly, new attention to women writers whose role thus far has been unacknowledged in the history of twentieth-century aesthetics, for example, Susanne Langer, Susan Sontag, Iris Murdoch, Eva Schaper, and Mary Mothersill. (Margaret Macdonald, Helen Knight, Katherine Gilbert, and Isabel Creed Hungerland are also figures about whom little is known; Gilbert and Hungerland each served two-year terms as president of the American Society of Aesthetics, in 1946 and 1965 respectively.) Although few of these thinkers would have identified themselves as feminist, their contributions – as well as those of other women whom we have yet to discover – can shed light upon the predominant mode of thinking within a discipline so dominated by men and the questions of artistic value and aesthetic experience they chose to prioritize.

A second suggestion involves a call to explore the underinvestigated topic of the feminization of aesthetics itself, another inward-looking turn that asks philosophers to reassess themselves in light of a bigger picture. The "feminization of aesthetics" captures the marginalization of aesthetics as a "soft" discipline within

the larger, more “male” province of philosophy. Future questions about the role aesthetics plays – or fails to play – within feminist philosophy may also enhance our understanding of women’s experiences as a core notion of feminist inquiry.

Finally, the newest explosion of research in cognitive science and individual cognitive “architectural” frameworks provides, perhaps, the most open and urgent avenue of invitation to study factors of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. Philosophers crossing disciplines are voraciously interested in the makeup and functions of emotions, psychological studies on perception and resultant value judgments, and the role of imagination in creating fictions: all ways of initiating new debates on some of the most traditional questions in contemporary aesthetics that are rich with opportunities (Currie 2003). The intersections of aesthetics with philosophy of mind, neuro-psychology, and developmental psychology, are ripe with testable hypotheses; surely it is worth the effort to explore whether gender plays a role!

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