BARBARA KRUGER
„Untitled" (I shop therefore I am)
111" by 113"
photographic silkscreen/vinyl
1987
COURTESY: MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

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Feminism and Aesthetics in Contemporary American Art[1]

What is feminist art? Can an ordinary viewer experience it in a neutral, detached, and objective way?

These two questions are the focus of this essay, which attempts to bridge a gap between philosophical aesthetics and feminist theorizing about women's art. The first question is purely historical, easily answered by means of a brief overview of the past twenty-five years of feminist art in America. The second question raises philosophical issues squarely within the realm of aesthetics, contingent upon who counts as "an ordinary viewer." Answering this question reveals a divergence of opinion as wide as the range of respondents.

Many philosophers would quickly and assuredly offer a resounding, "Yes," to the question of whether a work of art – even a feminist work of art – can be experienced in a neutral, detached and objective way. After all, the philosophy of art in its current American and British analytic mode continues a tradition which extends as far back as Plato. Plato discouraged creative activity that appealed to the passions of the soul and its accompanying erosion of human rationality. Since then, philosophers have continued to worry about art that appeals to the emotions over intellect. An ougrowth of this concern is the philosophical notion of disinterestedness, idealized in the eighteenth century by British theorists of taste and later expanded by twentieth century aesthetic attitude theorists like Jerome Stolnitz. To adopt a disinterested stance toward a work of art is to play down practical concerns, including ethical, moral and political ones, in order to more fully experience the **aesthetic** potential of a work of art.

Feminist theorists, on the other hand, would answer the question of whether a work of art can be experienced in a neutral, detached and objective way, with an overwhelming, "No!" Many femininsts believe that not even the **aesthetic** properties of a work of art can be divorced from the moral and political content.[2] Therefore, one cannot truly experience a work of art in anything but a sub-

[1] My thanks to the American Studies Center at Warsaw University where an earlier draft of this paper was presented.

[2] This paper will focus exclusively on representational, not abstract art, created by American women artists. The arguments in Section II can certainly be applied to other examples of feminist art, for example, the work of Magdalena Abakanowicz.

jective way. Such a view is diametrically opposed to the traditional philosopher's view.

This essay will consider the legacy of the philosophical concept of disinterestedness for contemporary aesthetic theory in light of feminist theoretical challenges. Contrary to what feminists advocate, I will argue not only that feminist art **can** be experienced disinterestedly, and at times it is highly appropriate to do so. Contrary to what many philosophers advise, I will contend that artworks, including feminist art, can benefit from a non-neutral, non-disinterested reading.

I. What is feminist art?

> There is no such thing as feminist art in general
>
> Linda Nochlin

> There is no such thing as feminist art, only art informed by different feminisms.
>
> Mary Kelly

Statistics from the Artists' Equity Association, recently published in a "Women in the Arts" newsletter from the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C., indicated that in 1987, approximately 44% of U.S. artists were women. In 1995, that number had grown to over 50%. Since half of the nation's artists were recorded to be female, one would naturally expect that half the shows and exhibitions of professional artworks would be by women. This only held true in the case of gallery and museum shows which were "blindly juried," i.e. judged without knowledge of the sex of the artist. Such shows were far fewer in number, however, than the number of "invited" shows. The vast majority of exhibitions – invited shows – featured 85% male artists and 15% female artists.[3] Recent trends indicate some significant progress, for example, in the New York gallery scene. Whereas ten years ago, the top twenty galleries showed no more than 10% women artists or none at all, now the number has grown to between 10% and 20%. In 1987, only four commercial galleries in the city showed at least one black woman artist; now there are nine.[4] Statistics for the inclusion of women artists in museums' permanent collections, however, are still terribly disproportionate; only 3% of museums' permanent holdings are created by women artists. Clearly, even taking into account the fewer numbers of women artists in history, this low percentage fails to reflect anything like the number of women artists actually creating art today. What might be the cause of such poor r e p r e s e n t a t i o n ?

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[3] *Women In the Arts* XIII, 3 (Summer, 1995), p. 2. It has been said that the proof of the lack of quality in women's art lies in the fact that art historians judged their works unworthy of inclusion in the canon of great art.Prior to 1980 there were virtually no women in art history texts. In 1986, out of approximately 450 artists appearing in the leading college art history textbook, 20 were women. Today, out of more than 575 artists listed, 48 are women. This is not a tremendous improvement, but it shows the fallacy of one line of reasoning previously used to discredit women's work.

[4] Roberta Smith, "The Gallery Doors Open to the Long Denied," *The New York Times* (May 26, 1996), Section 2, pp. 1, 29.

These statistics raise fundamental questions about issues of quality in the realm of art: what is good art? How does one decide which artworks have value? Is good art the kind of art that judges choose "blindly" or does it result from an informed decision to "invite" an artist to exhibit? Why have women artists consistently failed to attain high levels of quality within the American artworld? Before we turn to the philosophical foundations of a statistical phenomenon, let us review the history of feminist art which may give us some clues as to why women's work has been consistently undervalued.

There were few women artists creating "fine art" in the United States prior to the twentieth century, opting (more naturally) for the production of useful, artfully crafted domestic items like quilts or needlework: artifacts rarely considered "high art" within the hierarchy of the artworld. "Fine" artists who did achieve some level of success within the artworld from early to mid century would not have considered themselves to be feminist, such as the painters Georgia O'Keeffe, Elaine de Kooning, Alice Neel, Lee Krasner, the sculptor Louise Nevelson, and the photographer Margaret Bourke-White. Some of them who lived through the initial phase of feminist art in the late 1960s and early 1970s were adamant about denying the retro active application of the term "feminist" to their work. These artists believed that there was nothing unique about their work in terms of gender; they claimed that they simply created art, not women's art. If their art was considered good, it was because it was like art by other (male) artists, not because of any distinctive gender based qualities. Like the wave of New Criticism dominating the literary scene early in the century, they felt the sex of the artist to be irrelevant to the judgment made about her/his product. They expected their works to be evaluated solely according to their visible, aesthetic qualities and nothing else.

All this changed with the revolutionary surge in feminist consciousness in the late 1960s, initially a part of the political movement for women's rights. Although it is difficult to define what counts as feminist art – then and now – a pivotal figure in the initial years of its development, Judy Chicago, provides some guidance:

> True feminist art embodies a value system based on the opportunity for empowerment for everyone, rather than the notion of striving for power over others, which is the patriarchal paradigm.[5]

In the late 1960s, Judy Chicago began creating abstract, formal images known as "central-core imagery" which came to metaphorically symbolize women's unique physiology: the ability to give birth, the focus around a central (womb-like) core. Early works such as "Pasadena Lifesavers, yellow No. 4" and "Peeling Back" eventually gave rise to massize communal projects like "The Dinner Party" (1974--79; a collaboration with over 400 people) and "The Birth Project" (1980-85).[6] "The

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[5] "Conversations with Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro," Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.), *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), p. 73. This text provides a thorough history with extensive illustrations. Also useful is Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990).

[6] Faith Wilding, "The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-75," ibid., pp. 32-47.

Dinner Party" consists of a triangular table, each side 48 feet in length, set upon a white tile floor inscribed in gold with 999 women's names. The table is set with a total of 39 place settings, each with a sculpted/painted porcelain plate on a needlework placemat. The 999 inscribed names and the 39 place settings represent a historic or legendary woman.[7] Whether highly abstracted or recognizably representational, Chicago – and collaborator Miriam Schapiro – strove to develop a new visual iconography that captured and valorized women's unique experience of the world and their hard fought independence. Pedagogically, they were responsible for establishing influential models for women's art curricula: first in 1970 at Fresno State College (now known as California State University, Fresno) and the second at CalArts in Los Angeles. These programs served to introduce and encourage women students to create art that self-consciously diverged from artworks produced by men in terms of both their aesthetic properties (e.g. central--core imagery) and nonaesthetic properties (their political, moral intent and iconography).

The result of this burgeoning of women's creativity was an incredibly high level of artistic production, typically unrecognized by the gallery and museum scene and thereby redirected into women's cooperative galleries and separate support organizations. The Women's Caucus for Art originated at this time in dissatisfaction with its home organization, the College Art Association.[8] Numerous publications arose – periodicals such as the *Woman's Art Journal*, historical surveys accompanying exhibtions (such as *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists*) and early feminist art criticism, notably writings by Linda Nochlin and Lucy Lippard – that reported on work by women artists.[9] By the mid-1980s, private support had been channelled into establishing the National Museum of Women in the Arts which has become the single most important permanent collection of art by women in the world.[10]

In the early days of the 1970s, the explosion of women's art knew no bounds. Performance artists acted out explorations of women's sexuality (Carolee Schnee-

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[7] See Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: a Symbol of Our Heritage* (New York: Anchor Books, 1979) and Judy Chicago, *Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework* (New York: Anchor Books, 1980).

[8] The WCA currently boasts 4,000 members between its national and 40 state chapters. It is the largest national, multi disciplinary organization for women in the visual arts and holds an annual conference in conjunction with the CAA. Among other resources, it houses a slide registry of women's art and publishes a newsletter. Its address is WCA National Office, Moore College of Art, 1920 Race St, Philadelphia, PA 19103-1178.

[9] Eleanor Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage...*, (New York: Paddington Press, Ltd., 1974), in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name. Both Nochlin and Lippard have written extensively; two noteworthy writings are Nochlin's famous essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" originally published in 1970 and reprinted in Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) and Lippard's *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990).

[10] The NMWA's permanent collection includes work by women artists from the 16th century to the present. They also feature changing temporary exhibits, boast a library and research center of thousands of monographs and publications on women artists, house resource files on over 10,000 artists from all periods and countries, and publish a newsletter. Their address is 1250 New York Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20005-3920.

man, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta) and expressions of anger against the violent anti-female behavior of a male-dominated society (Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Leibowitz). Some women explored their racial identities (Betty Saar, Adrian Piper, Faith Ringgold) while others looked to common historical female roots (the goddess imagery of Mary Beth Edelson and Nancy Spero's revival of Greek female figures).[11] By and large, the artwork of the 1970s women's art scene was humanist, essentialist, (female) experience-based, celebratory, painterly, and often decorative while still seriously based in investigating women's roles (body and mind) in contemporary society. There was no doubt that such art engaged in challenging the dominant patriarchal power structure. This emphasis changed drastically in the next decade.

In the 1980s the work of photographers Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger as well as the LED public signage of sculptor Jenny Holzer became popular. Sherman became known for her self-portraiture: in early black and white shots she posed as women in 1950s film stills, and in later color shots, she was done up in wigs, makeup and costumes. Kruger's photomontages consisted of bold black and white imagery in conjunction with text, often available for mass consumption: works on actual billboards ("Untitled" <We Don't Need Another Hero> 1987) or silkscreened canvas tote bags ("Untitled" <I Shop Therefore I Am> 1987)[12] (See illustration). Holzer's flashing LEDs (light-emitting diodes) were also in the public domain, for example, a selection from her 1982 series, "Truisms," installed in Times Square, New York, read: "FATHERS OFTEN USE TOO MUCH FORCE."[13]

Considered by some feminist critics to be anti-humanist, anti-essentialist, elitist (based in post-structuralist theory), deconstructionist, formal, cool, and non-painterly, they have enjoyed considerable success within the male-dominated artworld while also arousing controversy within feminist circles. Internal criticism focussed on whether these newer, feminist "activist" works were really feminist at all, that is, whether they constituted (in Mira Schor's words) "an intellectually convincing critique of patriarchy" or whether they became part of the male establishment because they failed to be sufficiently politically challenging.[14] Some saw the tendency of Sherman to portray herself as a movie star/pinup girl as a sell-out to the kinds of soft porn images dominating male artists' work of the 1980s (David Salle, Eric Fischl).[15] Note the description of Sherman's work by a *male* art critic:

> Sherman poses herself in Playboy like centerfolds, ... I think some people (men) like it so much because some critics and

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[11] For a discussion of Adrian Piper's work, see my "Revising the Aesthetic- Nonaesthetic Distinction: The Aesthetic Value of Activist Art," Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer (eds.), *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (Penn State Press, 1995), pp. 45-272.

[12] Kate Linker, *Love For Sale: The Words and Pictures of Barbara Kruger* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990). For essays by Kruger, see *Remote Control: Power, Cultures, and the World of Appearances* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

[13] Michael Auping, *Jenny Holzer* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1992).

[14] Mira Schor, "Bac'dash and Appropriation," Broude and Garrard (eds.), *The Power of Feminist Art...*, p. 259.

[15] It is important to note the incredibly successful marketing and sales of works by Salle and Fischl. Both artists made no secret of the fact that they utilized images of women from porn magazines.

> collectors (men) like a little blonde served up in juicy color. That her photographs are ostensibly about female representation in popular culture seems beside the point...[16]

While some feminist critics praised the techniques of Sherman as liberating and innovative explorations of female sexuality, others bemoaned the use of the same, old misogynistic representations that had depicted women as sex objects – on view for the male viewer – for centuries (beginning with depictions of Venus by Titian, continuing with odalisques by Ingres, David, Matisse, not to mention a long history of soft and hardcore pornography flourishing in the twentieth century).

The early 1990s has proven no less acrimonious, especially in light of recent artworks of a genre known as "victim art" such as "Irresistable" (1992) by Sue Williams and "Tale" (also 1992) by Kiki Smith. Life-sized and very lifelike (made of rubber or wax), these figures represent women in humiliating moments of extreme vulnerability: either prior to or in the act of being assaulted, over-powered, debased. Feminist critics question why these works have become even more popular than the works of 1980s' women artists: are they better in quality? Is the artworld simply becoming more open to representing artworks by women in numbers more equal to those of men? Or is it the case that these images are more naturally assimilated into a society that traditionally depicts women as objects of desire, objectified sex symbols? Does their intent to parody porn fail, relegating them to the category of porn as well? Perhaps it is because they are non-threatening to the male (artworld) establishment, because they depict women as victims, but like pornographic imagery they appear seductive and willing. Feminist critics claim that they are evidence of a new "post feminist" phase: a 1990s backlash to 1970s celebratory essentialism, a moving past or away from a political consciousness about improving women's status, or worse yet: a deliberate undermining of feminist advances, for the sake of success in the artworld.

II. Can an ordinary viewer experience feminist art in a neutral, detached, and objective way?

As stated in the introduction, this question can be answered in two ways: affirmatively by philosophers and negatively by feminist theorists. Let us look at each in turn, beginning with the origins of contemporary philosophy of art, the empiricists of the eighteenth century.

Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, proposed disinterestedness as both a moral and aesthetic ideal in opposition to the notion of private interest (derived from Hobbes) in order to isolate the aspects of a mental state that precluded serving one's own ends. Disinterestedness was contrasted with the desire to possess or use an object, Francis Hutcheson concurred and recommended the exclusion of "feeling to what farther advantage or detriment the use of such objects might tend."[17]

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[16] Jeff Perrone, "Unfinished Business: 1982 New York Overview," *Images and Issues* (Jan./Feb. 1983), p. 39 as quoted by Broude and Garrard, "Introduction," *The Power of Feminist Art...*, p. 28.

[17] Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, 4th ed. (London, 1738), p. 4.

Edmund Burke placed disinterestedness at the center of his theory of beauty, frequently citing the female body as a beautiful object which can be perceived as beautiful only if the sole interest of the perceiver is in perceiving and not in the desire for possession.[18] Archibald Alison maintained that it was not enough to lack self-seeking motives; rather, we must attain a state of mind in which

> the attention is so little occupied by any private or particular object of thought as to leave us open to all the impressions, which the objects that are before us can produce.[19]

According to Allison, not only is the husbandman and the man of business oblivious to the beauty of nature, but so too is the philosopher. The first two are obviously interested in nature as something to be used, whereas the latter fails to abandon himself to the scenery: too absorbed in his own thoughts to be truly "open to all the impressions" the objects before him can produce.

Similarly to Shaftesbury, David Hume contrasted private and public interest whereby public interest was nearly indecipherable from disinterestedness. It constituted an interest which did not refer to the self; it was communal (i.e. public) and free of individual bonds, Hume recommended that a true judge is one who is free of prejudice:

> I must depart from this situation [friendship or enmity with the author], and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, any individual being and my peculiar circumstances.[20]

For Hume, failing to "forget" personal (individual) interests leaves a person subject to prejudice; such sentiments are "perverted" and the contemplation of the beauty before him fails to sufficiently "enlarge his comprehension."

Kant expanded the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness, separating it from the practical and conceptual realms. To be disinterested was to be without interest in the object's existence. Making the notion of disinterestedness central transferred the focus of the aesthetic experience to the perceiver and away from the work of art; the pleasure of the perceiver became tantamount and such pleasure was a function of a particular epistemological makeup. It was only a short step to the aesthetic attitude theorists' insistence that attitude was the primary determinant of one's aesthetic judgments. Jerome Stolnitz, a twentieth century aesthetic attitude theorist, took up the previous ideas of Alison:

> To perceive disinterestedly is to make oneself a pure, unflawed mirror, prepared to receive without distortion all the impressions which the objects that are before us can produce."[21]

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[18] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Boulton (London, 1958).

[19] Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, 4th ed. (Edinburgh, 1815).

[20] David Hume, "Of a Standard of Taste," in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, III, T.H. Green and T.H., Grose (eds.) (London, 1925), p. 277.

[21] Jerome Stolnitz, "Of the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'" originally published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Winter, 1961), pp. 131-143, reprinted in *Aesthetics:*

On this view, no object can be excluded from the realm of the aesthetic; by properly adopting a particular mode of perception, any object can be perceived disinterestedly.

In contrast to the philosophical tradition these authors represent, feminists have long touted the slogan, "The personal is the political." For many feminists, it is an unquestioned assumption that achieving a mental state of disinterestedness – even if desirable – is impossible. Distancing, like objectivity, universality, and neutrality, is seen as a fabrication of the male-dominated scholarly tradition. Whether one looks to feminist epistemology, critiques of science, or feminist ethics, a main tenet of various strains of feminism casts doubt upon anything remotely resembling a distancing of one's self from the content and methodology of the enterprise.

Just as art history often trains us to look at images of the female nude dispassionately and formalistically, thereby undoing what feminists believe are interested reactions we have to images of the body, two hundred years of philosophy recommends we "dis" our interest, that is, that we self-consciously and deliberately adjust our interest downward into the more acceptable form of dis-interest.[22] Denying one's identification and involvement with the work on a personal level is precisely what feminists see as masculinist (or paternal). Inhibiting one's natural and instinctive gendered reactions in a self-conscious, controlling way is seen as psychological censure. According to feminist thinking, disinterestedness is a prime example of a masculinist mode of thought in which it is assumed that the best way to experience a work of art is as a neutral, unbiased, selfless observer. As Katy Deepwell notes, the masquerade of neutrality is over:

> Feminism's critique of the disinterested observer exposed the partisan nature of all readings (when that 'neutral' figure was identified as white, male, and middle-class)...[23]

Many of the accusatory questions coming from feminist critics about controversial 1980s and 1990s feminist art grow out of a long-standing concern about the way images of women are interpreted. Deepwell's claim about visual art is rooted in a phase of British film criticism that paralleled the rise of feminist visual art. The most influential articulation of this view comes from Laura Mulvey. In her well known 1975 essay entitled, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey initiated an analysis of women characters as objects of the male gaze in the films of Alfred Hitchcock based on psychoanalytic readings. In uncovering and explicating a notion of "the male gaze" Mulvey sought to challenge the conventional notions of pleasure derived from mainstream film by highlighting the role of gender

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A Critical Anthology, George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (eds.) (New York, 1977), pp. 607-625. For further discussion of Stolnitz, see my "Feminism in Context: A Role for Feminist Theory in Aesthetic Evaluation," *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics*, John W. Bender and H. Gene Blocker (eds.) (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1993), pp. 106-121.

[22] "Dis" is a slang word that has become popular among young adults. Sometimes "to dis" also means "to show disrespect." If so, "dis-ing" becomes an even stronger adjustment than a simple lessening of interest.

[23] Katy Deepwell (ed.), *New Feminist Art Criticism* (Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 8.

in a spectator's viewing of the female body on screen. When a male viewer looks at an image of a woman, he is unable to look in any other way than with a possessing, desiring, objectifying look. His gaze wholly succumbs to his scopophilic instinct: to look at her as **erotic object**, to derive masculine pleasure from the power his gaze has over her body, on view for his delectation. The gaze of the film viewer – external to the film – is similar to two other types of male gazing that goes on within film: the gaze of the film-makers/camera-men who manipulate the camera that defines the medium and the gaze of the male actors who look at and interact with the women on film. According to Mulvey, cinema is uniquely positioned as a medium within the arts to provide the paradigm of the male gaze:

> The place of the look defines cinema, the possibility of shifting it, varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, striptease, theatre, shows and so on. Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.[24]

Thus, in this early essay, the spectator of woman in film is presumed to be male: Hitchcock as film-maker, his cameramen, the male heroes within films (the policeman in *Vertigo*, the dominant male possessing money and power in *Marnie*, and the photo journalist whose sole activity is the viewing of others through a camera lens, in particular a woman in another apartment, in *Rear Window*). In a later essay, Mulvey addresses an objection made by readers that she has failed to discuss the female viewer. Rather than attempt to isolate and explain a particularly female look or gaze which might give rise to a particularly feminist sort of pleasure, she instead extended her earlier analysis to female viewers, claiming that women who watch films come to view them as men, with a male gaze, learned by habituation and "training." The female spectator's masculine point of view is a "trans-sex" identification, that is, "a **habit** that very easily becomes **second nature.**"[25] In other words, women come to gaze at women in-film the way men do – by viewing them as erotic objects on view for males, both inside and outside the filmic structure – as potential possessions of males, and subject to male fantasies and desires.

Clearly, Mulvey's thesis is not without problems. It has spawned a considerable body of literature that attempts to identify and explore such problems. It is undeniably the source, however, of two important consequences: ongoing investigations into the question of how women artists and film-makers can utilize woman's body in visual representation without becoming complicit voyeurs, and spin-off notions of the male gaze, such as bell hooks' "oppositional gaze" or Luce Irigaray's "resistant gaze." What these notions share is a deep skepticism about anything like a neutral, distanced, disinterested mode of perception of visual images. Women are encouraged to adopt an oppositional gaze, to resist our trained natural ten-

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[24] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 25. Mulvey's essay was originally published in *Screen* (Autumn, 1975).

[25] Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's 'Duel in the Sun' (1946)," reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 33.

dency to view as men do in favor of a pro-active, empathetic identification **with** the women onscreen that is neither possessing nor objectifying. For instance, Hooks claims that black female spectators were "trained" to laugh like whites at early television shows like "Our Gang" and "Amos n' Andy" which offered degrading representations of blacks in Hollywood. They had to resist this natural tendency and learn to look with "a black look:" to critique their stereotypical dehumanizing depiction along racial lines. It is only within the past few years that a growing body of film theory and criticism by black women has begun to emerge, one that brings awareness to the act of gazing: an awareness of the way in which race and racism determines the visual construction of gender:

> Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator.[26]

Thus, another layer is added to the promotion of a feminist interested stance: besides gender, one is encouraged to gaze with interest at the racial dynamics of visual representations of women. Many other layers can be added as well: attention to class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so on. One can imagine such layers to be lenses one wears to correct for deficiencies in sight; one can adopt a male-gaze lens, a feminist lens, a black feminist lens, a black lesbian feminist lens, etc. It is important to note, however, that feminists believe we never gaze without some sort of lens, however weakly it operates or however few we choose to utilize. Their objection is to the philosopher who claims he is wearing none, who insists he is a "pure, unflawed, mirror."

What is notable for our purposes here is what distinguishes a feminist stance toward art, namely, the antithesis of the masculinist disinterested stance. Contrary to the basic tenets of disinterestedness, a feminist stance encourages an intensification and nurturing of interest with regard to how the image of woman is used or possessed, including a feeling for advantage and detriment (contra Hutcheson), a "healthy dose of prejudice" (contra Hume) and open admission that no view is a "pure, unflawed mirror" ready to receive with openness all impressions such a representation might yield (contra Alison, Stolnitz). In effect, to adopt a feminist stance is to refuse to "dis" one's interest, and to acknowledge that no view can ever truly "dis" his or her gendered, raced, sexed, etc., interests.

I would like to propose that the way we experience art (including feminist art) lies somewhere between the two extremes: the traditional endorsement of masculinist disinterestedness and its antithesis, feminist interestedness. What I suggest here is a bit of "gender treason," defined by one feminist as "the simultaneous endorsement of both authority and freedom, order and flexibility, objectivity and subjectivity, and reason and feeling."[27] The proposal is twofold: (1) although disinterestedness is a masculinist mode of experiencing art, it is useful and appro-

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[26] bell hooks, " The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, pp. 149-50.

[27] Sara Munson Deats and Langretta Tallen Lenker (eds.), *Gender and Academe: Feminist Pedagogy and Politics* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1994), p. xxiv.

priate even for experiencing feminist art, and (2) experiencing feminist art interestedly (with a variety of lenses) is not only advisable on philosophical grounds, it is the logical extension of certain claims toward openness. Far from being a safe compromise between two extremes, there is enough in the duality of this proposal to upset both philosophers (claim (2)) and feminists (claim (1)). Nevertheless, I believe my analysis more accurately captures what happens when we experience complex, subtle and oftentimes controversial works of art.

What I advocate here is a revisionist feminist stance fleshed out more adequately in terms of the types of **attention** one focuses on an artwork rather than on the state of mind (Hume's freedom from prejudice) or (aesthetic) attitude a perceiver is able to achieve. It will probably turn out that attending one way or the other is not maintained throughout the duration of the entire (or recurring) experience. Interested Attention (IA) may persist only for the duration of one's initial encounter. It may last for the first few seconds, or it may come later. It may be interspersed with brief moments or long intervals of Disinterested Attention (DA). The "toggle" between the two types of attention might be deliberate or not. In any case, one cannot "see" with both types of attention at once. One either experiences the work with IA or DA. Both modes are possible and it is the viewer's conceptual framework that leads her to attend one way or the other.

This is analogous to a person switching between seeing the duck and seeing the rabbit in the well-known duck-rabbit drawing of 1900. Sometimes one intends to switch from reading it one way to the other and is successful. At other times, no matter how strongly one attempts to switch, the alternative is elusive. Finally, there are times when one finds the switch occurring involuntarily and in spite of an attempt to focus on the duck or the rabbit exclusively. Although he was not commenting on an ambiguous picture in particular, Hume's observations on one's initial encounter with a work of art are worth noting:

> There is a flutter or hurry of thought which attends the first perusal of any piece, and which confounds the genuine sentiment of beauty. The relation of the parts is not discerned; the true characters of style are little disinguished: the several perfections and defects seem wrapped up in a species of confusion, and present themselves indistinctly to the imagination.[28]

Clearly a duck rabbit picture – with its two choices – does not present us with as much "confusion" as a more complicated work of art. But the analogy is worth pursuing since even current theories of the psychology of perception utilize ambiguous images to demonstrate the same point.

Consider another recognizable ambiguous figure: the old woman/young woman figure. According to one group of theorists, a viewer's choice of seeing it one way or another, i.e., the perceptual organization she chooses, depends upon the context.[29] This context may be within the stimulus pattern itself or it may be provided by the subject's expectations. Far from being passive to external stimuli,

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[28] David Hume, "Of a Standard of Taste."

[29] See the theories of Julian Hochberg and Ulric Neisser in Henry Gleitman, *Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), p. 246.

our sensory systems "actively transform their stimulus inputs." For instance, if a viewer is shown an unambiguous image of the old woman before viewing the ambiguous one, she is more likely to see the latter as the old woman rather than the young woman. Similarly, if a discussion about bird watching precedes the viewing of the duck-rabbit picture, a viewer is likely to see a duck rather than a rabbit. According to the perceptual construction hypothesis, all patterns are constructions created by the perceiver and the perception of patterns is heavily affected by experience and expectations. Furthermore, a viewer's mental set helps to determine not only the construction but also the interpretation of visual stimuli.

It is said that we are typically unaware of our mental sets; we can be predisposed toward one particular perceptual organization without knowing that we are. By analogy, we can explain Hume's initial confusion upon encountering a work of art (beauty) as a preliminary configuring of our mental set to construct both a pattern and an interpretation from what is perceived. A viewer of a visual image such as Sherman's untitled self-portraits or Kiki Smith's "Tale" scrambles to clarify the ambiguities of what is seen. She might see it initially with DA (as an interesting contrast of lights and darks, shapes and colors) or, after learning about the artist and the intent behind her work, she might find herself involuntarily focusing on it with IA (as a record of exploitation or abuse of women, or viewing it with "an oppositional gaze"). Interestingly, Mulvey has written about Sherman's work along similar lines, claiming that post-modern artworks lend themselves to an "oscillation effect:"

> The viewer looks, recognises a style or trope, doubts, does a doubletake, recognises the citation; and meanings shift and change their reference like shifting perceptions of perspective from an optical illusion.[30]

The important point is that the experience and concomitant effect of the work art rely upon input from **both** modes of attention, each with its own conceptual framework. After all, one can look at an image of a nude female body with DA by attending to its color, texture and overall balance as well as viewing it with a possessing or objectifying male gaze or even a critical feminist gaze (IA). Burke attempted to direct the attention and interest of the perceiver of a representation of a nude female body to the **act** of perceiving, not in the viewer's **desire** for possessing. Whether or not this ideal is attainable, feminists – to some degree or other – would endorse Burke. In fact, taking a disinterested view (DA) toward a representation of a nude female body may be just what distinguishes the art lover's gaze (or even the heterosexual woman's gaze) from the lascivious pornographer's gaze. But the two sorts of looking are temporally exclusive; one cannot look in both ways at one and the same time.

In addition to the question of **how** one might take a disinterested approach to a feminist work of art is the additional question of **why.** One reason for advocating a disinterested approach is to allow an artwork to elicit experiences of a far wider

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[30] Laura Mulvey, "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87," *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 73. The essay was originally published as " A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman" in *New Left Review* (July/August 1991).

variety. Donning several lenses and switching between lenses allows a work to be interpreted in numerous ways. It allows a viewer to take full advantage of its potential. This reasoning should have a familiar ring since philosophers of taste argued for the optimal experience of a work of art (via disinterestedness) **on these very grounds**. Similarly, feminists have argued for an interested approach in order to expand beyond the traditional philosophical emphasis on objectivity and neutrality. In both cases, each has argued for the value of a **fuller** experience of a work of art by **excluding** the other's approach.

I, however, recommend **both**: disinterestedness (DA) and interestedness (IA), masculinist and feminist. For the feminist viewer intent on seeing the reflection of herself as political being in a work of art, it affords an opportunity to step back and enjoy the aesthetic properties that defy reflection. For the philosopher intent on purely reflecting – mirror like – the aesthetic properties, it provides a way to establish some human rapport with other elements of the work. For both – and for any other "ordinary viewer" – it is a reminder that one value of art is its potential to provide a rich multiplicity of experiences. Any narrowing of the opportunities, i.e., any refusal to try on new and different lenses, results both literally and figuratively in a loss of (in)sight.

BARBARA KRUGER
„Untitled" (I shop therefore I am)
111" by 113"
photographic silkscreen/vinyl
1987
COURTESY: MARY BOONE GALLERY, NEW YORK.