

Indiana University RAD

ILLiad TN1400781



Journal Title: Simone de Beauvoir Studies

Call #: PQ2603.E362 Z878 v.18 2001-2002

Volume: 18

Location: B-WELLS RCSTACKS

Issue:

Month/Year: 2001-2002

Pages: 31-48

Notes: Journal is only published once per year; there is no issue number or month. Journal is located in Wells Library.

Article Author: Peg Zeglin Brand

Article Title: The Aesthetic Attitude in The Ethics of Ambiguity

Imprint:

Peg Brand (pb)
Philosophy Dep't.
Indianapolis IN 46202

Notice: This material may be protected by US copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

THE AESTHETIC ATTITUDE IN THE *ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY*

PEG ZEGLIN BRAND

If one works at the intersection of visual art, feminist art theory, and philosophical aesthetics—considered by this author to be one of the richest terrains to mine and mold—one quickly notes too few scholarly opportunities that bring all three together in analyzing the writings of Simone de Beauvoir under the aegis of “aesthetics.” Granted, Beauvoir’s many literary achievements—her novels, short stories, essays—are well-noted by feminist scholars in English and Women’s Studies. Also, their deep philosophical import is probed by feminists in ethics, social/political philosophy, and the history of philosophy. But they are not, by and large, studied by aestheticians, feminist scholars in the visual arts, or Beauvoir scholars interested in her opinions on:

- 1) the important role of the visual arts in society and the political legacy artists can contribute to the world
- 2) the traditionally revered philosophical concept of the aesthetic attitude
- 3) the use of the aesthetic attitude to improperly justify controversial works of art.

This essay aims to address this lack of recognition by studying *The Ethics of Ambiguity* for what it has to offer on the topic of art and aesthetics. In addition, it will be pointed out that Beauvoir’s *Ethics* is distinct in the history of aesthetics for its atypical (proto-feminist) stand against the popular notion of the aesthetic attitude. Her promotion of political (feminist) art presages the feminist art movement of the 1970s. Ahead of her time, Beauvoir recognized the vital interplay between art and ethics. Given the resurgence of interest in ethical issues among analytic aestheticians today¹—as well as the shortage of writing on Beauvoir in the field of philosophical aesthetics—an analysis of Beauvoir’s interplay of ethics and aesthetics is timely and enlightening.

The Role of Artists and Art in Society

Beauvoir’s short but densely written 1948 volume is rich with ethical insight, political commentary, existentialist doctrine, and edifying recommendations for moral behavior. Often overlooked, however, are her comments on art and the aesthetic attitude, particularly in the context of British and American writings in aesthetics dominating philosophical thought at the time. First, let us look at Beauvoir’s general claims about art and her explicit comparison of a work of art to an individual’s mode of transcendence toward freedom. How does the author characterize an individual’s pursuit of freedom through a work of art in her comparison between artistic goals and audience identification?

From the very start, Beauvoir hints at the comparison between the two, based on their timelessness and power to affect change. She quotes the French essayist Montaigne: "The continuous work of our life [. . .] is to build death" (EA 7). For Beauvoir, humans are unique and unlike plant and (mere) animal life because they have knowledge and cogitate about their existence. They alone possess consciousness which enables and compels them to realize their condition of "tragic ambivalence." For Beauvoir, ambivalence is the condition of every human being, but its tragic nature can be overcome, or, to state it more correctly, can be faced head on, assumed, and internalized toward a positive end.

The human condition is ambivalent because one is both subject and object. Each of us is both "pure internality" and an object among objects. Each is an individual but must live together with other(s). We are timeless consciousness yet physically finite (EA 7). Human beings, caught between "the past which no longer exists and the future which is not," exist in this moment which is nothing. As nothing, as lack, we must work toward individual and communal freedom through transcendence. "To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision" (EA 24). This personalized principle provides the template for determining one's goals and ethical choices in life, all of which necessarily affect others: "To will oneself free is also to will others free. This will is not an abstract formula. It points out to each person concrete action to be achieved" (EA 73).

Existentialism offers a "philosophy of ambiguity" by which the continuous work of life is to prepare for the "end" of life, for death. But death is never really the "end," since the role of man in life is to strive for freedom—individually and for others—and this lofty pursuit can persist past death, embodied in the deeds and actions that live on after we are physically gone. All humans feel "this tragic ambiguity of their condition" but, she chides, most philosophers "have tried to mask it" (EA 7) or flee it (EA 9). Her recommendation stands in stark contrast:

In spite of so many stubborn lies, at every moment, at every opportunity, the truth comes to light, the truth of life and death, of my solitude and my bond with the world, of my freedom and my servitude and my significance and the sovereign importance of each man and all men. There was Stalingrad and there was Buchenwald, and neither of the two wipes out the other. Since we do not succeed in fleeing it, let us therefore try to look the truth in the face. Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting. (EA 9)

According to Beauvoir, creating works of art (literary or artistic) is one way of looking truth in the face and performing an action that can have lasting impact into the future. Similar to the way individuals' actions persist beyond their time

on earth, works of art rise above their temporal existence, their time-bound context, and persist beyond their moment(s) of creation. They exist beyond ties to the moment and origin of artistic creativity, especially "good" works, i.e., works of value. One way Beauvoir states this comparison more concretely is by presenting it in terms of why criticism is so easy and art so difficult:

[T]he critic is always in a good position to show the limits that every artist gives himself in choosing himself; painting is not given completely either in Giotto or Titian or Cézanne; it is sought through the centuries and is never finished; a painting in which all pictorial problems are resolved is really inconceivable; painting itself is this movement toward its own reality [. . .]. (EA 129)

She pursues the comparison to individual human completion and transcendence through personal choice, "because in any case human transcendence must cope with the same problem: it has to found itself, though it is prohibited from ever fulfilling itself" (EA 130). More explicitly, "There is an art only because at every moment art has willed itself absolutely; likewise there is a liberation of man only if, in aiming at itself, freedom is achieved absolutely in the very fact of aiming at itself" (EA 130-1).

Art becomes a method of confronting the truth and establishing something that continues beyond death: not to glorify or aggrandize the artist but rather to convey a particular content that edifies, uplifts, and educates an audience toward transcendence. "End" has a double meaning, that of "goal" and "fulfillment." With the recognition of the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition, man acknowledges "that every living movement is a sliding toward death" (EA 127). Being able to face this fact—whether by confronting their circumstances and/or creating art—human beings "also discover that every movement toward death is life" (EA 127) and that life, through choice, is composed of actions that can outlive us: "[T]here are projects which define the future of a day or of an hour; and there are others which are inserted into structures capable of being developed through one, two, or several centuries" (EA 127-8).

Beauvoir insists on the value of certain art works that persist through time, into the future, due to their long-lasting effect, just as other human deeds and actions persist through time. Projects, including those which we call "life projects," can and should persist past one's own limiting time and place:

When one fights for the emancipation of oppressed natives, or the socialist revolution, he is obviously aiming at a long-range goal; and he is still aiming at it concretely, beyond his own death, through the movement, the league, the institutions, or the party that he has helped set up. (EA 128)

Works of art become a means of overcoming the finality of death *if* they are of the proper sort, i.e. directed toward a worthy ethical or political goal. Choosing the correct (or "genuine") sort of art-making is neither simple nor necessarily easy to accomplish:

The artist and the writer force themselves to surmount existence in another way. They attempt to realize it as an absolute. What makes their effort genuine is that they do not propose to attain being. They distinguish themselves thereby from an engineer or a maniac. It is existence which they are trying to pin down and make eternal. The word, the stroke, the very marble indicate the object insofar as it is an absence. Only in the work of art the lack of being returns to the positive [. . .]. This is what Kant said when he defined art as "a finality without end." (EA 69)

Thus the work of art, composed of words, brush strokes, or stone, constitutes the physical medium by which some segment of existence is pinned down and made eternal.

Pinning down existence is one means of confronting the truth, looking truth in the face, recording and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations. Sharing this knowledge with others also enables artists to transcend and attain genuine freedom. It provides a *positive* means of dealing with the ambiguity of existence. All the arts can be utilized to attain this goal. All of them can provide examples by which to live:

One of art's roles is to fix this passionate assertion of existence in a more durable way: the festival is at the origin of the theatre, music, the dance, and poetry. In telling a story, in depicting it, one makes it exist in its particularity with its beginning and its end, its glory or its shame; and this is the way it actually must be lived. (EA 127)

Given her promotion of valuable works of art that can enable readers and viewers to move toward freedom, it is no surprise that Beauvoir's literary output was enormous, far surpassing her "purely" philosophical writing. What sorts of art works did she recommend and in what way did she advocate that audiences experience them?

Beauvoir's Denunciation of the Aesthetic Attitude

A close reading of the section on aesthetic attitude will help us understand the atypical nature of Beauvoir's stance for the time. The aesthetic attitude is specifically addressed in the first section of Part III of *The Ethics*, which is entitled "The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity" and constitutes the largest section of the text. In this section, Beauvoir invokes the concept of the aesthetic

attitude as she often does with other historical and philosophical notions, without mention of its historical origin. She begins by arguing that the aesthetic attitude constitutes a *negative* approach to experiencing life and a withdrawal of human interaction, one that must be avoided *before* one moves on to working with the more *positive* aspects of ambiguity.

She first characterizes the aesthetic attitude in general terms: human beings, of course, must live together, but often do so while keeping themselves "at a distance" from current and past events and by interacting with others "with a detached joy" (EA 74). She offers a characterization:

We may call this attitude aesthetic because the one who adopts it claims to have no other relation with the world than that of *detached contemplation*; outside of time and far from men, he faces history, which he thinks he does not belong to, like a *pure beholding*; this *impersonal* version equalizes all situations; it apprehends them only in the *indifference* of their differences; it excludes any preference. (EA 74-5, italics mine)

In Beauvoir's opinion, to equalize all situations by means of an aesthetic attitude is to refrain from comparison and value judgments. It is an attempt to remain impartial and to capture what happens at the perceptual level of "pure beholding."

In contrast and in moving from the general to the specific, she chronicles a list of offenders who adopt such an attitude toward history or their own present surroundings. They include the "lover of historical works present at the birth and the downfall of Athens, Rome, and Byzantium," "the tourist," the "many Italians," particularly an imaginary "intellectual Florentine," as well as "many Frenchmen" in 1940 and the years following. All these persons observe their surroundings and their past with "serene passion," "tranquil curiosity," and "a position of withdrawal, a way of fleeing the truth of the present" (EA 75-6).

Her condemnation of her French contemporaries under the Nazi occupation of Paris is not subtle:

[T]here is no project which is purely contemplative since one always projects himself toward something, toward the future; to put oneself "outside" is still a way of living the inescapable fact that one is inside; those French intellectuals who, in the name of history, poetry, or art, sought to rise above the drama of the age, were willy-nilly its actors; more or less explicitly, they were playing the occupier's game. (EA 76)

A comparison to her Italian neighbors reinforces her antipathy toward "aesthetes": "Likewise, the Italian aesthete, occupied in caressing the marbles and bronzes of Florence, is playing a political role in the life of his country by

asserting that everything may equally be the object of contemplation, since man never contemplates: he does" (EA 76).

Perceptively aware of the power we possess in delineating the ways we react to works of art, Beauvoir condemns the adoption of an attitude of indifference, neutrality, distance, and detached contemplation and—like the truism of 1970s feminist ideology—turns the (im)personal into the political. For her, there is no possibility of remaining neutral and detached; there is no rising above the political fray; there is no "pure beholding." Rather, there is only the clumsy attempt to espouse neutrality and the futile desire to distance oneself from present circumstances. When she claims that "there is no project which is purely contemplative," she denies the existence of a separate and isolated aesthetic response. For her, ethics and politics cannot be pulled apart from aesthetics.

This message was blatantly out of step with contemporary Anglo-American aesthetics of the time, a tradition perpetuated by male philosophers who fastened upon the dual notions of distance and disinterestedness to advocate the deliberate disavowal of interest in a work of art.² Beauvoir is brazenly writing against the backdrop of several centuries of philosophical thought.

Consider the weight of philosophic tradition against which she argues, starting with the British Empiricists. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, proposed disinterestedness as both a moral and an 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" (Hutcheson 573). 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 for its own sake and not in the desire for possession.

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" (Alison 71). David Hume contrasted private and public interest: public interest was communal and free of individual bonds. Hume adumbrated Kant's sense of disinterestedness in his recommendation that a true judge is one who is free from personal prejudice. Kant expanded the notion: to be disinterested was to be without interest in the object's existence.

In the nineteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer proposed a theory of the Will based on a disinterested viewpoint by which to contemplate the art object for its own sake, and for no other (practical) end. In 1912 Edward Bullough coined the term "psychical distance" to capture the attitude of disinterestedness that is needed to fully appreciate an *aesthetic* encounter with a fog at sea. His

famous example cited the effort a person must exert to dispel anxiety and fear about the ship's crashing in order to appreciate the fog aesthetically, i.e. appreciate it "for its own sake." As recently as 1914, Clive Bell published a theory about significant form in order to explain the unprecedented lack of realism in post-impressionist art. His variation on the traditional aesthetic attitude theory retained the feature that a person must be able to respond to a work of art containing significant form in a suitable and specific manner for the artwork to evoke an aesthetic emotion in the viewer.

How different is Beauvoir's claim about the man of *detached contemplation* who believes himself to be "outside of time and far from men" (EA 75), deceived into thinking that he is facing history "which he thinks he does not belong to, like a *pure beholding*" (EA 75). In essence, Beauvoir argues that to adopt an aesthetic attitude is to engage in self-deception about various things at many cognitive levels: one's place in the world, the attempt to fully disengage from it, and the role the arts and art appreciation play in society. And it is to do so by choice and with free knowledge of the repercussions, since the adoption of the aesthetic attitude was a conscious and willful act. For Beauvoir, the person was always responsible for attempting to withdraw from the world.

Although variations were pursued, the basic concept of a special disinterested stance toward a work of art persisted well past the middle of the twentieth century, with philosophers taking absolutely no account of Beauvoir's criticisms and condemnation. This is not particularly surprising, since she was (a) a woman writing in a field dominated by males; (b) French; and (c) an existentialist. Unfortunately, analytic British and American aestheticians would not have granted her serious attention at the time. Interestingly, nearly twenty years passed before any (other) significant opposition to the aesthetic attitude arose with the publication of (American) George Dickie's well-known essay "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude." (1964). Dickie's essay came upon the heels of the continued promotion of the aesthetic attitude in the late 1950s and early 1960s by Vincent Tomas, Virgil Aldrich, Jerome Stolnitz, J.O. Urmson, and Eliseo Vivas. Aesthetic attitude theories continued to maintain an incredible hold on the imagination of aestheticians as they consistently and emphatically dismissed consideration of the content of a work in favor of focusing on a detached mode of perception.³

What Beauvoir objected to, it must be stressed, was the adoption of an aesthetic attitude as a necessary and sufficient condition for experiencing a work of art or experiencing life. She held that it distracted artist and viewer alike from the vital social and political role works of art can play in the world.

One can only wonder how much more enriched the discourse of philosophical aesthetics might have been if philosophers had paid attention to Beauvoir's criticism of the aesthetic attitude in 1948. Acknowledging her criticisms might have lessened their rigidity about detachment. Philosophers and artists could have engaged in a healthy, robust and ongoing dialogue on the social and political import of art, particularly during the years of World War II. There could have been, on the part of influential Anglo-American philosophers,

a more realistic recognition and appreciation for the many ways an audience might experience art: ethically, politically, and spiritually, as well as aesthetically. Let us now consider the potential fallout from adopting an aesthetic attitude, as it revolves around controversial works of art.

The Improper Justification of Controversial Works of Art by means of the Aesthetic Attitude

Recall that for Beauvoir the artist and writer are always part of the world: "[F]reedom realizes itself only by engaging itself in the world: to such an extent that man's project toward freedom is embodied for him in definite acts of behavior" (EA 78). Those acts are either ethical or not:

[I]t is on the basis of a certain individual act of rooting itself in the historical and economic world that this will thrusts itself toward the future and then chooses a perspective where such words as goal, progress, efficacy, success, failure, action, adversaries, instruments, and obstacles, have a meaning. Then certain acts can be regarded as good and others as bad. (EA 19)

Beauvoir talks about controversial works of art and "the aesthetic justification" of their subject matter under the aegis of the aesthetic attitude. For her, only certain "projects"—a more inclusive term embracing both actions in one's life and creations of an artistic nature—are justifiable, and she condemns artists who attempt to justify certain types of subject matter she finds unpalatable:

It is for the artist and the writer that the problem is raised in a particularly acute and at the same time equivocal manner, for then one seeks to set up the indifference of human situations not in the name of pure contemplation, but of a definite project: the creator projects toward the work of art a subject which he justifies insofar as it is the matter of this work; any subject may thus be admitted, a massacre as well as a masquerade. This aesthetic justification is sometimes so striking that it betrays the author's aim; let us say that a writer wants to communicate the horror inspired in him by children working in sweatshops; he produces so beautiful a book that, enchanted by the tale, the style, and the images, we forget the horror of the sweatshops or even start admiring it. Will we not then be inclined to think that if death, misery, and injustice can be transfigured for our delight, it is not an evil for there to be death, misery, and injustice? (EA 76-7)

Beauvoir argues, as many have done before her, that the power of art lies in its effect on viewers and readers. If we, as an audience, are charmed and delighted by

a work of art depicting horror by means of a beautiful portrayal because we have successfully distanced ourselves from its evil nature, how can we then bring ourselves to condemn the actual horror on which the depiction is based?

Later in the text, Beauvoir chillingly revisits this important issue when she points out the indifference that might arise in response to the sheer number and depth of horrors portrayed in photographs not necessarily intended as works of art but merely as documents of the carnage of Nazi concentration camps:

Horror is sometimes self-destructive; before the photographs of the charnel-houses of Buchenwald and Dachau and of the ditches strewn with bones, it takes on the aspect of indifference; that decomposed, that animal flesh seems so essentially doomed to decay that one can no longer even regret that it has fulfilled its destiny; it is when a man is alive that his death appears to be an outrage, but a corpse has the stupid tranquillity of trees and stones: those who have done it say that it is easy to walk on a corpse and still easier to walk over a pile of corpses [. . .]. (EA 100-101)

Clearly, we must carefully distinguish here between two aspects of the experience of the work of art—or documentary photograph—which are basic to discussions in aesthetics. One is artistic intent, or, as Beauvoir calls it, “the author’s aim,” while the other is the viewer’s response: the worry that through “enchantment” and seduction, we the viewers will “forget the horror of the sweatshops or even start admiring it,” or we the viewers will grow indifferent to the horror of piled corpses and bone-filled trenches. The two parties, creator and viewer, are distinct, although they may be linked by common perceptions and reactions; i.e. the author’s aim (horror) may become the viewer’s response (also one of horror). However, the second does not necessarily follow from the first; hence the sheer delight, and oftentimes frustration, of the experience and interpretation of works of art.

Beauvoir’s worry is that both artist and viewer will not only forget the horror that is the source of the depicted subject matter, but will also come to “admire” it *as* subject matter in the beautiful work of art. Even if the viewer doesn’t admire the evil in the world but simply becomes indifferent to it after adopting an aesthetic attitude, Beauvoir’s condemnation is steadfast. Recall that the French or Italian aesthete who attempts to rise above, remain aloof, and eschew politics is as much a pawn in the political dealings of the oppressor as if he were the oppressor himself.

It is undeniable that in Beauvoir’s hierarchy of five types of being, only certain types of artists and works of art function to move us toward freedom. It is not as clear, however, how an artist is to achieve this success. Beginning at the bottom level of the hierarchy, the sub-man is unable to create works of value that aim toward higher goals: “Just as a bad painter, by a single movement, paints bad paintings and is satisfied with them, whereas in a work of value the artist immediately recognizes the demand of a higher sort of work, in like

fashion the original poverty of his project exempts the sub-man from seeking to legitimize it" (EA 42-3).

One level up from the bottom is the serious man, one version of which is the nihilist, exemplified by the negative project of wanting to be nothing and seeking denial even, at times, of one's own existence through suicide. Beauvoir boldly offers several examples of nihilist artists, including those who, like Marcel Duchamp, proposed nonsense poetry and found objects like a urinal as "creations" diametrically opposed to traditional objects of "art" and beauty. She considered those projects overwhelmingly negative: "The constant negation of the word by the word, of the act by the act, of art by art was realized by Dadaist incoherence. By following a strict injunction to commit disorder and anarchy, one achieved the abolition of all behavior, and therefore of all ends and of oneself" (EA 54).

The Surrealists, including such artists as André Breton, who authored the Surrealist manifesto, fared badly as well. Beauvoir cites early proponents who were suicidal or "destroyed their bodies and ruined their minds by drugs" (EA 54). Others pursued "a sort of moral suicide" by which they dropped to the level of the inactive sub-man: "[T]hey no longer try to flee, they are fleeing" (EA 55). These artists upheld an ethics of total and pervasive negation—of aesthetic, spiritual, and moral values—by means of the promotion of life and art as matters of chance and arbitrary choice (EA 55). No attempt at positive action was undertaken until some of the Surrealists tried to "reform," whereupon Beauvoir lashes out at their institutionalization and self-aggrandizement. Only a portion of them and their artistic output constitute the few occasions of *genuine* and *positive* political activity. Beauvoir is bitingly sarcastic in her disapproval of the rest:

We have been present at the establishment of a new Church, with its dogmas, its rites, its faithful, its priests, and even its martyrs; today, there is nothing of the destroyer in Breton; he is a pope. And as every assassination of painting is still a painting, a lot of surrealists have found themselves the authors of positive works; their revolt has become the matter on which their career has been built. Finally, some of them, in a *genuine* return to the positive, have been able to realize their freedom [. . .]. They have engaged themselves, without losing themselves, in political action, in intellectual or artistic research, in family or social life. (EA 55, italics mine)

It is made clear by means of examples that the only genuinely positive activity is engaging with politics, research, or interpersonal relationships. But what, specifically, does this mean for artists and writers?

Beauvoir asks similar questions toward the end of her essay: "What must be done, practically? Which action is good? Which is bad?" (EA 134). She responds: "To ask such a question is also to fall into a naive abstraction. We don't ask the physicist, 'Which hypotheses are true?' Nor the artist, 'By

what procedures does one produce a work whose beauty is guaranteed? Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science and art. One can merely propose methods" (EA 134). The methods, unspecified, must be accompanied by contemplation and a desire for knowledge that is shared with others.

Beauvoir writes most aptly as an literary artist and *not* a philosopher when she describes the artist who needs to think about her creation "without expecting any ready-made solutions to come from these reflections" (EA 134). She continues her criticism of the aesthetes by urging them to create art that seeks to end injustices, not just describe them: "Let the 'enlightened elites' strive to change the situation of the child, the illiterate, the primitive crushed beneath his superstitions; that is one of their most urgent tasks [. . .]" (EA 138). More specifically, she espouses a guiding principle by which artists can determine the ethical value of the works they create:

Thus, we can set up point number one: the good of an individual or a group of individuals requires that it be taken as an absolute end of our action; but we are not authorized to decide upon this end *a priori*. [. . .] To put it positively, the precept will be to treat the other [. . .] as a freedom so that his end may be freedom [. . .]. (EA 142)

It is clear that only those at the highest level—those persons who are genuinely free—are able to escape the traps and limitations of the self-imposed lower levels: "Thus, the constructive activities of man take on a valid meaning only when they are assumed as a movement toward freedom; and reciprocally, one sees that such a movement is concrete: discoveries, inventions, industries, culture, paintings, and books people the world concretely and open concrete possibilities to men" (EA 80-1).

The proper perspective for both creating and experiencing art, then, includes knowledge, self-awareness, and a desire to share and encourage others toward freedom from constraint and oppression. Finally, far from the detached and sterile contemplation advanced by aesthetic attitude theorists, Beauvoir encourages and celebrates the connections—and love—possible between people. Prefiguring Carol Gilligan's ethics of care, Beauvoir insists on the importance of human relationships: "Let men attach value to words, forms, colors, mathematical theorems, physical laws, and athletic prowess; let them accord value to one another in love and friendship, and the objects, the events, and the men immediately *have* this value; they have it absolutely" (EA 158).

The Proto-Feminist Nature of Beauvoir's Stand against the Aesthetic Attitude

In the previous section, we took a closer look at how the creation of certain kinds of controversial art and one's approaches to them point to ways in which Beauvoir argues against the adoption of an aesthetic attitude. In this section, the analysis can be extended to show that Beauvoir's stand against the

aesthetic attitude prefigures feminist art theory and art criticism of the past three decades.

Consider an example that might bring more clarity to this claim about Beauvoir's aesthetics. One of the most recognizable names in the feminist art movement which began in the United States in the 1970s is that of Judy Chicago. Chicago's visual art, political initiatives, feminist teaching, and theoretical writing were ground-breaking milestones in the establishment of a women's art movement and feminist theoretical discourse. Chicago challenged both the style and substance of the many types of art that had been created by male artists and championed by male critics. Her rhetoric celebrating "cunt art" and vaginal imagery, particularly in the 1970s collaboration *The Dinner Party*, enabled many women artists, including those of succeeding generations, to "open concrete possibilities" beyond the confines proscribed by the male-dominated art world of the past.

She insisted on an uncompromising freedom of artistic choice which broke down barriers for women in terms of the acceptable creation of political art, erotic art, and female-centered art. One might conclude that Chicago operated according to Beauvoir's precept: "to treat the other [. . .] as a freedom so that his [her] end may be freedom [. . .]" (EA 142). She consistently worked toward the good of a group: the recognition of past women (for example, the 999 names of women inscribed on the tile floor of *The Dinner Party*); the elevation of their physicality (celebrating the female body as in *Female Rejection Drawing #3 (Peeling Back)*, 1974); the celebration of their procreative role (*The Birth Project*, 1981-1987); and an intolerance of male violence (*Powerplay*, 1982-1987). The *Holocaust Project* (1988-1995), a collaborative work created by Judy Chicago and her collaborator (and husband) Donald Woodman, is particularly well suited for connecting Beauvoir's 1940s thoughts on art to 1980s feminist art theory.

Beauvoir rejected detachment from real life issues and promoted facing them head on. This is what Chicago does with the many works in the *Holocaust Project*. She has found herself enmeshed in a hostile debate over depictions of the Holocaust that has been raging for fifty years. Opponents of such depictions claim a variety of positions that range from the extreme of "no one should depict the Holocaust because it is too horrendous an evil to recall" to the opposite position that "one should depict the Holocaust to keep fresh in our minds the horror of the Nazi atrocities and to prevent them from ever happening again."⁴

Many intermediate positions are also popular, including the position that "only certain types of depictions should be allowed or judged to be acceptable." For example, cases in which the evil of the Holocaust is compared to other evils in the world produced by human beings are not permissible. Naturally, considerable controversy can arise over the vagueness of what types of representations are allowed. This debate touches deeply at the emotions and memories of Holocaust survivors and their families, and it is with the utmost respect that I broach it here in order to make a point about Beauvoir's aesthetics

applied to a continuing controversy that occasionally appears in the art world but surfaces much more often in Jewish Studies circles, particularly theological and academic ones.

I believe that Beauvoir would sanction and encourage the kind of art work that Chicago and Woodman have undertaken because it constitutes a bold attempt to face the truth of the past, expose it, and promote the awareness of thousands of viewers who otherwise might not think about the evil of the Holocaust and its aftermath. It is an artistic attempt to recapture the knowledge of the past, present it visually, and encourage others to learn from the horror in order to shape a better future. Unlike the example Beauvoir presented about the distraction of the beautifully depicted sweatshops that takes viewers away from the real issue of evil, I believe she would agree that there is beauty in some of the details of the *Holocaust Project* but that they do not distract us nor make the evil depicted any less potent.

Consider, for instance, only one portion of the project: an intricately created paint and photo image of Jewish detainees on a train traveling through the countryside entitled *Wall of Indifference* (43" by 8'). The center portion of the work features a long train hidden behind foregrounded trees that contains cramped families, a rabbi, and a mother throwing her child from the train. Inspired by a similar true story of a mother attempting to save her child from the impending death chambers, the artists not only depict the imagined events of the time but add figures on the lower left and right hand corners of the image who turn their backs on the doomed prisoners by presenting a wall of indifference. On the lower left, we see three male figures—a Russian soldier in uniform, a cigarette-smoking Brit, and a generic American—all wearing flags colorfully symbolic of their countries. In the lower right are two figures in white: a female nurse and a male religious figure.

Chicago's journal records the following about her plan and daily work on the image: "It will deal with the world's indifference to the plight of the Jews, symbolized by figures representing the Allies, the Vatican, and the International Red Cross, all resolutely turning their backs on a transport."⁵ If there is any ambiguity that arises in interpreting this image, it is quickly forestalled by the artists' thorough efforts to place such images in an exhibition with documentary and educational panels, provide a cassette tape to accompany one's tour of the works, and display ample printed documentation that provides extensive context eliminating the possibility of mistaken assessment. This stands in stark contrast to the more celebrated paintings of a 1980s German artist named Anselm Kiefer, for example, whose huge ambiguous works can be interpreted as glorifying the Nazi past. For Chicago as for Beauvoir, indifference is unacceptable.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show that Beauvoir's views about the aesthetic attitude were bold, atypical, and proto-feminist in terms of the damaging role such an attitude of detachment plays in our experience of the

visual arts in society. By utilizing passages from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, I have argued that Beauvoir was ahead of her time and recognized the vital interplay between art and ethics, art works and politics, in ways similar to those of feminist artists of the 1970s. Her rejection of the aesthetic attitude merits further study, particularly in light of its application to feminist visual art of the past and the future.

NOTES

1. Examples include *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (ed. Jerrold Levinson. Cambridge University Press, 1998); *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*, (eds. Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos. State University of New York Press, 2001); and *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical* by Marcia Muelder Eaton (Oxford University Press, 2001).

2. For a more thorough discussion of the gendered aspects of a "masculinist" notion of disinterestedness, see Peggy Zeglin Brand, "Disinterestedness and Political Art." (in *Aesthetics: The Big Questions* ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998: 155-171).

3. Writers such as Alan Casebier and Stuart Hampshire promoted these theories even in the 1970s after George Dickie's essay gained recognition. I am not suggesting that all aesthetic attitude theories are ill-conceived and implausible. They can prove helpful, for example, in assessing abstract works of art or portions thereof, such as the non-representational paintings of Lee Krasner or the visual patterns of early American quilts and Native American pottery.

4. Jewish Studies scholar Alven Rosenfeld, for example, has severely criticized art works depicting the Holocaust, including those of Judy Chicago (as well as the film *Schindler's List*), in *Thinking About the Holocaust: After Half a Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

5. *Holocaust Project* 118.

WORKS CONSULTED

Alison, Archibald. *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*. 5th ed. London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1817.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: Citadel Press, Carol Publishing Group Edition, 1996. (EA)

Bell, Clive. *Art*. London: 1914. Reprint, New York: Capricorn Books, 1958.

Bullough, Edward. "'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle." *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957.

Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. ed. J. T. Boulton. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958.

Chicago, Judy, and Donald Woodman. *Holocaust Project: From Darkness Into Light*. New York: Viking/Penguin Books, 1993.

Hucheson, Francis. *An Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. In Dickie, George and Sclafani, Richard J. eds. *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by J. H. Bernard. New York: Hafner Publishing Co., Inc., 1951.

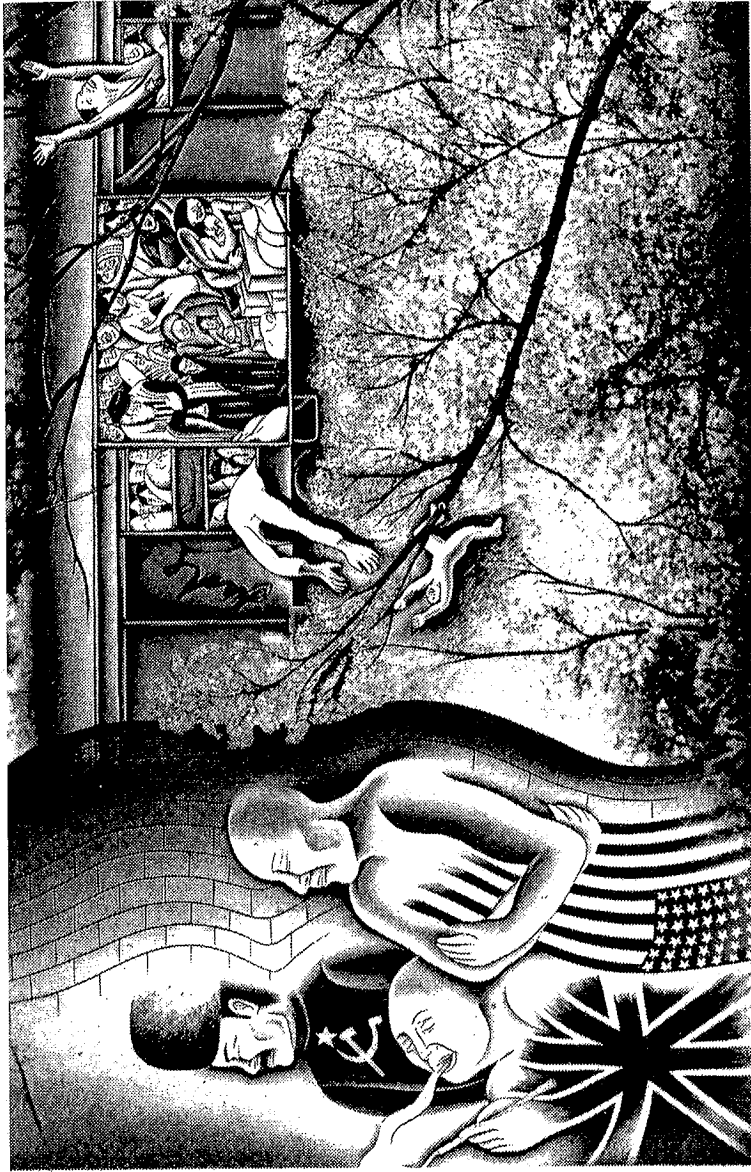
Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*. 3 vols. 2d ed. Translated by R. B. Haldance and J. Kemp. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.

PEG ZEGLIN BRAND is an artist and Assistant Professor of Gender Studies and Philosophy at Indiana University in Bloomington. She is editor of *Beauty Matters* (Indiana University Press, 2001) and co-editor with Carolyn Korsmeyer of *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (Pennsylvania State Press, 1995). She is currently working on a book entitled *Parodies as Politics: Feminist Strategies in the Visual Arts*, which will be illustrated with her own art work. She is also co-editing, with Mary Devereaux, a special issue of the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* on Feminism and Aesthetics.

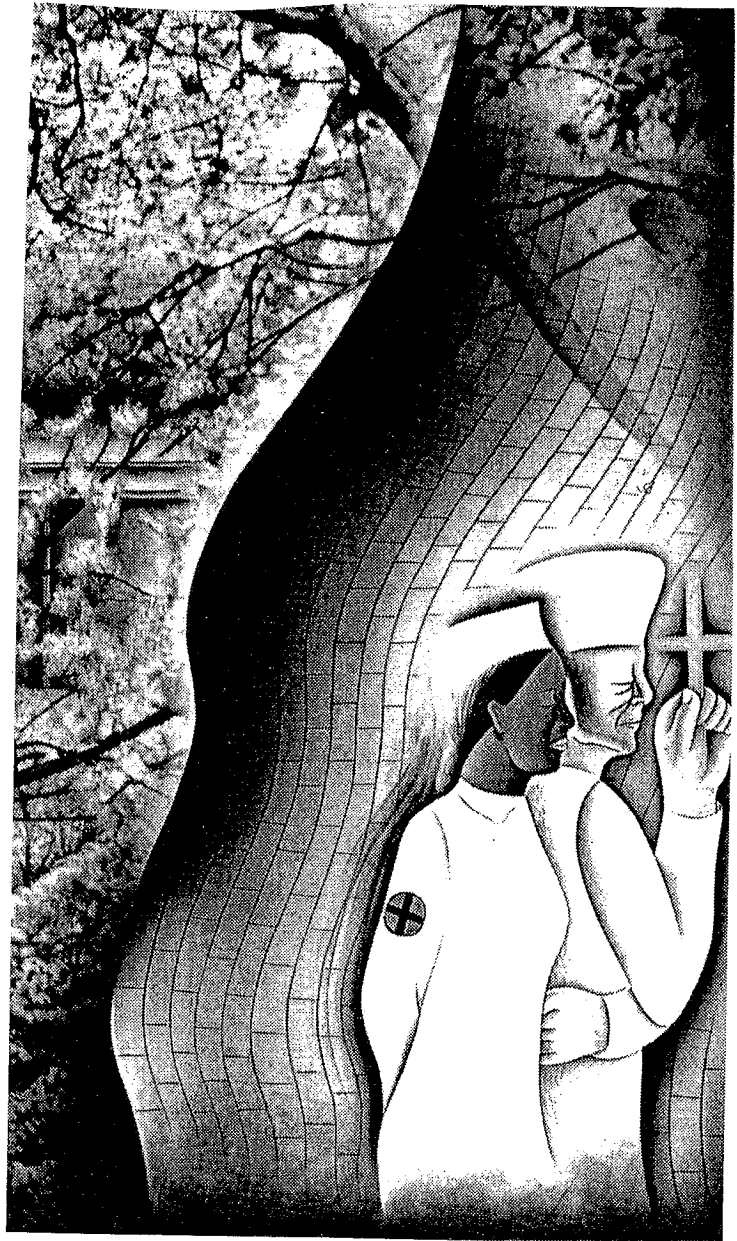


Wall of Indifference, from the *Holocaust Project*,
© Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman 1989, sprayed acrylic, oil, Marshall
photo oils and photography on photolinen, 43 1/4" x 8' 1/4". Collection of the
artists and Through The Flower Corporation. Photo: ©Donald Woodman

artists and Through The Flower Corporation. Photo: ©Donald Woodman



WALL OF INDIFFERENCE DETAIL 1



WALL OF INDIFFERENCE DETAIL 2