FEMINISM AND TRADITION IN AESTHETICS

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Yes, well, it's very subtle, of course, it's all on a covert, understated level . . . you just have to know how to really *read* these symbols if you want to get at their true meaning. . . . But ultimately it's pretty obvious, isn't it?

Note

1. Adrian Piper, "Goodbye to Easy Listening," in *Pretend* (New York: Colorstone Printing, 1990), n.p.

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Revising the Aesthetic-Nonaesthetic Distinction: The Aesthetic Value of Activist Art

Peggy Zeglin Brand

As feminist researchers in the 1960s and 1970s began to (re)discover forgotten female artists of the past five hundred years, the artworld responded in a variety of ways. Sometimes, it ignored the findings. At other times, it denied the status of these works of art. More prevalent, however, was the reluctant acknowledgment of such discoveries of art, accompanied by the caveat that they lacked aesthetic value. Similarly, as researchers of the 1980s undertook a similar process to (re)discover the works of minority artists or artists of color, the artworld once again responded in a narrowly circumscribed way: conceding their status as art while withholding aesthetic praise. Was this merely coincidence? Or did it reflect an ongoing trend to assess artworks that—however interesting or valuable in a nonaesthetic way—are dismissed for lack of aesthetic value? Is there some sort of philosophical tradition that serves as a basis for this trend?

This essay will explore the role that the aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction plays in assessing activist art by women and artists of color. First, I shall review one traditional line of philosophical thought and show how it serves as the foundation for three types of reasons typically given for artworks reputed to lack aesthetic value. I develop two of the three reasons by examining recent writings opposed to the aesthetic value of activist art by well-known art critic

Donald Kuspit, pointing out his aberrant use of "obscene." Kuspit's examples of activist art—the work of Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Adrian Piper—are presented in light of his charges. I then explore Piper's art in depth in order to outline ways of expanding the notion of aesthetic value beyond its traditional confines. Finally, I suggest moving beyond entrenched, traditional patterns of assessment and invite underrepresented voices to contribute to the emerging discussion of the multiplicity of aesthetic values.

Tradition and How It Affects Aesthetic Value

One tradition in critical and philosophical discourse on art relies upon the long-standing opposition and competition between aesthetic and nonaesthetic properties of a work. Typically, assessing such properties is sufficient for determining the aesthetic and nonaesthetic value of a work of art. This traditional "distinction" is more aptly called a "dichotomy" since the Greek *di* plus *temnein* more aptly captures the harshness of the *cutting* that results when the value of an artwork gets dissected. For it is the *whole* work of art we experience, perceive, and appreciate when it comes to making judgments about its value. We can surely analyze it into its parts—spatially, formally, temporally—but the only fair assessment of a work of art is of its totality. Anything less is either premature, partial, or uninformed.

This tradition has its roots in the eighteenth century when philosophers like Hutcheson and Shaftesbury sought to isolate the properties of an object that gave rise to a feeling of pleasure, the capacity for which was embodied in a faculty of taste or a sense of beauty. From the beginning, attempts to explain beauty focused on formal properties like uniformity in variety, smallness, and smoothness. The images under discussion, of course, were always representational. The only properties that aroused feelings of pleasure did so immediately and directly by allaying any interventionist role that practical interests might play; hence, disinterestedness became the cornerstone of the proper experience of an aesthetic object. This three-part emphasis on formal properties, disinterestedness, and pleasure was retained by Kant, Bullough, and Bell, as well as twentieth-century aesthetic-attitude theorists. It still holds strong despite attempts to the contrary, such as Dickie's "Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude" and Goodman's push for the primacy of cognitive value.[1] It should come as no surprise in assessing activist art that a tradition stressing formal properties, disinterestedness, and pleasure would not serve content-oriented, non–pleasure-producing art very well. As Bell insisted: "The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful, but it is always irrelevant. For to appreciate a work of art, we must bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its affairs and ideas, no familiarity with its emotions."[2]

Motivated by the prevailing trend of New Criticism that sought to assess a work apart from its sociohistorical context as well as recent trends in abstract art, Monroe Beardsley was most influential in reenergizing this tradition as he successively revised his theory of art from the 1950s on.[3] On his view, formal properties—unity, complexity, and intensity as revealed in a work's regional properties—play the vital role of functioning as "symptoms" of aesthetic "gratification" (a term that replaced the more problematic term "pleasure"). In one essay alone, Beardsley cited the predominance of the following terms to argue that "there *is* something peculiarly aesthetic to be found in our world or our experience":

aesthetic experience	aesthetic objects
aesthetic value	aesthetic concepts
aesthetic enjoyment	aesthetic situations
aesthetic satisfaction[4]	

According to Beardsley, the five symptoms marking the *aesthetic* character of an experience rely heavily upon relegating irrelevant (and practical) distractions to the sidelines, focusing instead on object-directedness, felt freedom, detached affect, active discovery, and "a sense of wholeness from distracting and disruptive impulses."[5] It also hints at the preference given to aesthetic value over any other value (be it cognitive, moral, or political). In a rebuttal to Goodman, he stated that cognitive value (defined by Goodman as a work's capacity to contribute to the "creation and comprehension of our worlds") is "not generally the overriding or dominant purpose of artworks."[6]

One other insight into the primacy of aesthetic value is revealed by Beardsley's antagonism to those interested in a work's moral value. In *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism,* Beardsley concurred with the influential approach of Jerome Stolnitz, which sought to focus exclusively on a work's immediate, unmediated, aesthetic effect in *isolation* from its context, thereby relegating moral judgments to judgments about the "side effects" of a work of art. He caricatured the Moralist stance (but did not satisfactorily refute it), adding further fuel to the fire of the primacy of aesthetic value over any other value.[7] George Dickie's recent views move toward more recognition for moral/political value as one form of cognitive value, but do not take its

advocacy far enough.[8] The tradition appears, at times, to be cast in stone: whatever other nonaesthetic values artworks might possess—call them cognitive, moral, or political—the tradition continually ranks them second in importance to aesthetic value.

Thus, in spite of recent improvements upon the notion of aesthetic value, activist art fares poorly by means of it when judgments are made and disseminated. The influence of the tradition on what gets exhibited, marketed, critiqued, enshrined in museums and art history texts and ultimately used as examples by aestheticians (who take their cues from the workings of the artworld as well as from dominant philosophical theories) is long-lasting and insidious. It will continue to affect the status of activist art until the notion of aesthetic value is reassessed and expanded.

What types of reasons are given by evaluators when claiming an artwork lacks aesthetic value? With respect to activist art, three types of reasons seem to emerge: (1) those that indicate an inherent lack of talent (basically ad hominem attacks), (2) those that point to the presence of or preoccupation with a message (the nonaesthetic component) that diminishes attention paid to the medium (the aesthetic component), and (3) those that express a dissatisfaction with the content—not just the presence—of the message, thereby tying the overall value of the work solely to the judgment of the work's content.

Consider the first type of reason given for a work lacking aesthetic value: a work lacks aesthetic value because the artist lacks talent. This charge, though clearly a possible charge against any artist, has been leveled more often against female artists and recently against artists of color than it has against white, male artists. Undoubtedly, the belief that women in general possessed less artistic talent on average than their male counterparts kept female artists excluded from the history of Western art until they were slowly introduced into major art history texts in the early 1980s under pressure from feminist scholars.[9] This type of strategy was extended to the devaluing of artists of color as well and lay behind the repeated practice of combining disparate types of art—for example, African and Oceanic—under the rubric "primitive" and exiling it to its own chapter in art history texts, set apart from the chronological sequence of chapters tracing development in the "real" history of art. (Asian art, Native American art, and art of the Americas were similarly segregated.) Furthermore, where the twentieth century clearly afforded more opportunities to highlight women and artists of color, they were rarely included (the exception being a token work by Georgia O'Keeffe or Jacob Lawrence).

Consider some examples of this point of view. Sofonisba Anguissola, a contemporary of Michelangelo, was characterized by a critic in 1915 as an artist who "painted with something of that tepid rose-tinted sentimentality proper to the woman-painter, then and now."[10] A similar charge was leveled in 1964 against Judith Leyster, a seventeenth-century Dutch artist: "Some women tried to emulate Frans Hals, but the vigorous brushstrokes of the master were beyond their capability, one only has to look at the works of a painter like Judith Leyster to detect the weakness of the feminine hand."[11] Charles Sterling, spokesman for the Metropolitan Museum in 1922, upon learning that a painting purchased for $200,000 and proudly dubbed "the Met's David" was possibly the work of Constance Charpentier, a student of Jacques Louis David, said: "Its poetry, literary rather than plastic, its very evident charms, and its cleverly concealed weaknesses, . . . all seem to reveal the feminine spirit."[12] Sterling's criticism reveals the crucial role that contextual information can play in assessing a work's aesthetic value. When the work was thought to have been created by David, it was considered a work with value. When the work was thought to have been created by a woman, it was a work without value. Although nothing changed visually, properties of the work that previously accounted for its high aesthetic value were immediately reassessed as properties exhibiting the artist's lack of skill. The modern version of this story is the experience of black artists whose works were considered valuable by galleries upon first viewing (in slide form) but who were subsequently turned away when they showed up in person. The more subtle form of this strategy is exemplified by galleries telling black artists in the 1980s that their works lack value.[13]

In all these cases, one strategy is repeatedly used to denigrate the skill and talent of women and artists of color. Compared to their male or white counterparts, they "naturally" came up short on talent. It is common knowledge that many women suffered at the hands of this strategy when paired with more famous and supposedly talented male artists: Camille Claudel and August Rodin, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Ana Mendieta and Carl Andre, even Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Steiglitz (before O'Keeffe became well known). It is also known that certain women artists, for example Edmonia Lewis, who was both African American and Native American, fared much better living and working in Rome in the 1850s and 1860s than in the United States. A brief overview of the last few decades shows the meager gains made by women and artists of color in gaining recognition within the artworld.

Statistics publicized by the infamous Guerilla Girls (self-declared Conscience of the Artworld) indicate that between 1973 and 1987 the percentage of women in the Whitney Biennial—the milestone of an artist's career—never

rose above 32 percent and the percentage of artworks by women acquired for permanent museum collections never rose above 14 percent. The most recent Whitney Biennial (5 March–13 June 1993) contains roughly thirty women out of eighty artists: only a slight increase to 37.5 percent.

A seven-year study completed in 1988 by Howardena Pindell (former associate curator at the Museum of Modern Art and herself an African American artist) reported 11,000 artists (African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American) living and working in the state of New York.[14] Fifty-four out of sixty-four galleries surveyed in the state represented mostly white artists. Thirty-nine galleries in New York City, including nearly all of the most prestigious spaces, represented *only* white artists. Not surprisingly, the problem gets replicated in museums. Given the fact that museums rely heavily upon the gallery system that chooses artists, markets them, and establishes their reputations, the representation of minority artists in major New York museums over a seven-year period ranged from either no representation at all to a mere 7 percent of the total number of artists shown.[15]

The bottom line of the "new exclusionism," as cast by Lowery Sims, current associate curator of twentieth-century art at New York's Metropolitan Museum, is money. Since works by artists of color do not sell as well in the galleries as works by whites, they are seen as poor investments. This fact lies hidden, however, beneath the surface. According to Sims, "Economic issues, therefore, are couched in diversionary issues like 'quality,' 'taste' and 'talent.' "[16] Predictably enough, defenders of the "whiteness" of the statistics deny that nonaesthetic issues like race and gender bear on their decisions. One former curator of the permanent collections at the Whitney defended his choice of artists, adamantly claiming that his decisions were based solely on aesthetic issues; "questions of race, religion, and sex were subordinated to that end."[17] Perhaps this is true, although one remains skeptical in light of the startlingly low numbers. One can envision the strictest aesthetic standards excluding *some* works by women and minorities but not the consistently high number that statistics repeatedly reveal.

A second type of reasoning used to devalue works by women and minorities is that a work of art lacks value because it contains a message (or moral). Addressing issues of gender, race, and class, these works are seen to diverge from purely aesthetic concerns into the realm of the nonaesthetic, necessarily showing less interest in the exploration and manipulation of the medium than in getting the point across. Hilton Kramer provides a classic statement of this view in critiquing a 1980 show of women's art (which he claimed reflected "no discernible standard of quality"): "This is what always occurs, of course, when art is politicized. Esthetic criteria must be subordinated to the interest of some larger cause."[18]

This kind of statement reveals the bias held by many critics, conservative and liberal alike, who—when they do value work by women or artists of color—tend to favor aesthetically "pure," nonrepresentational art like that of Louise Nevelson, Helen Frankenthaler, and Martin Puryear, over more content-oriented representational works. It also explains why art historians extol the work of "the great masters," even though such works *are* representational, many of which are religious or political. Because we are trained to look at crucifixion scenes, starving peasants, rapes, abductions, and the horrors of war disinterestedly and for the aesthetic pleasure they bring, i.e., in terms of line, color, and shape, we underplay the political or religious content that could just as easily be seen to detract from the formal properties of these works as it supposedly does in contemporary activist art. The tradition that values the aesthetic over the nonaesthetic has led critics to ignore the message of a work when it is convenient to do so (or at least suppress it in the name of aesthetic value) but then to conveniently target the content of a work when it is seen to detract from aesthetic value.

The third type of reason given for art coming up short on aesthetic value is that a work of art lacks value if its message is misguided, too strident, or simply unacceptable. It may be considered distasteful, immoral, political, politically incorrect, or even politically correct (in the pejorative sense of the term). Many feminists believe this to be the reason behind the rejection of works that celebrate women's experience or promote women's rights: works that are often categorized as propaganda. Persons of color have similar suspicions about the devaluing of works that highlight the positive aspects of race other than the predominant race. Even prior to the opening of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, one previewer complained that "too much of today's political art is utterly artless," that is, too removed from the realm of aesthetics.[19]

Consider a case of criticism from 1987 leveled against a work by African American artist Adrian Piper entitled *Cornered* (Fig. 11.1): "TALK LIKE ADRIAN PIPER'S IS REFINED AND POLITE, and full of upperclass angst, but it's about as racist as anything you can expect to hear these days."[20] An artwork that sufficiently offends a person's moral or political sensibilities can prompt a work's aesthetic value to be reduced to an assessment of its moral value (this is Beardsley's version of the Moralist's Argument from Reduction). This view, considered extremist by Beardsley, clearly departs from the traditional method of arriving at a work's aesthetic value based on formal properties, disinterestedness, and aesthetic pleasure. An artwork can be devalued simply by

Fig. 11.1. Adrian Piper, *Cornered,* 1988. Courtesy John Weber Gallery, New York

reducing its aesthetic value to a strident and unacceptable racist (in this case, pro-black) message. This approach, which basically nullifies the aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction by collapsing the former into the latter, has been used by critics who oppose activist art as well as by feminists who argue for it. The well-known slogan, "the personal is the political," tolerates no apolitical artwork, response, or mode of evaluating. Though there are some Moralists (and feminists) who propose the collapse of this distinction, I contend that Beardsley is right and the distinction must be preserved. There must be *some*

way to capture the unique function that formal, aesthetic properties serve apart from the moral or political purposes they also serve.[21]

A less extreme view is captured by Beardsley in what he calls the Argument from Correlation, which claims that moral devaluing somehow contributes to (or correlates with) aesthetic devaluing. This view does not collapse the aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction, but rather points to an integral, yet complicated, connection between the two types of properties. I believe Beardsley is on the right track in characterizing the relationship this way, although he abandons this approach too quickly in favor of the traditional emphasis on aesthetic properties, thereby causing him to urge an isolationist approach to a work, that is, to judge the work apart from its context. I shall pick up the thread of this approach later in advocating a retention of the aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction, but with a concern for the moral or political value having an influence upon the aesthetic value of a work of art.

Recently, more and more critics are voicing concern over contemporary art's capacity to moralize. According to Eleanor Hartley, we are "at a moment when self-righteousness pervades the art world."[22] Donald Kuspit laments artists' attempts to rationalize their work by appealing to a right to moralize; that is, by setting universal moral standards based on one's individual code of ethics akin to Kant's categorical imperative ("act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law"). I offer an analysis of Kuspit's view in depth, since it clearly exemplifies types two and three, reasons that see activist art as lacking aesthetic value due to the presence and content of a work's message.

Only Obscene Art Has Aesthetic Value: Kuspit's Aberrant Use of "Obscene"

Kuspit's attack is studied, elaborate, and clearly reinforces the Beardsley–Stolnitz tradition. Using the highly charged label "commissar art," he claims that activist art is "inwardly bankrupt" and "no longer provocative":[23] "The moral superiority of would-be commissar art (and artist) brings in its wake tyranny and inhumanity."[24] In its place he encourages "genuinely obscene" art and encourages critics to assume a new role: one that "transcends the traditional critical goals" of description, interpretation, and evaluation. Critics are urged to move beyond criticism, to "root out and denounce what might be called the

commissar factor in self-proclaimed morally concerned art" (*SN*, 111). The effect is a call for critics to become commissars themselves—commissars of the obscene. By acting as agents of the obscene, critics become empowered to dismiss the entire genre of activist art as they reject the particular moral principles embodied in individual works. In most cases, these principles promote equal, humanitarian treatment of all persons, especially the oppressed and disadvantaged. Kuspit seems to ignore these concerns, however, as he proceeds with an odd and idiosyncratic use of "obscene."

According to Kuspit, we live in the modern world with a damaged sense of self. Healing consists of one's self feeling "inwardly alive; it lost its sense of being alive in the first place because it lost contact with the obscene life within" (*SN*, 107). Art can play a role in restoring a sense of life to the self as long as it is the correct type of art: obscene art.

In the spirit of ancient philosophy, Kuspit sees a tension between the types of art that delight us and those that teach us. For him, the "opposites" of pleasure-giving and teaching in art do not mix. Simply put, art that pleases and delights the senses makes the self feel "inwardly alive"; it possesses aesthetic value and promotes healing, thereby assuring it of humanitarian value. Nonobscene art, or activist art, on the other hand, neither pleases nor delights; it fails to make the self feel inwardly alive because it is the expression of those who feel a sense of guilt at giving pleasure or delighting the senses. It is the obsession of those who believe they are healing the modern world, but who are deceived in their purpose as much as they are deceived into a sense of smug, moral superiority. Their "get-the-message art" is intended to change the world but in actuality neither moves us nor helps us heal. In fact, its "conspicuous moral influence" actually suppresses the genuinely obscene. Thus, to partake in activist art precludes the pleasure and healing a viewer of art might enjoy from obscene art. It is the fault of the artworld (critics, among others) that activist art has become mainstream; hence, Kuspit's search-and-destroy mission for the critic/commissar of the obscene.

Obscene art is genuine when it is not sanctioned or ritualized by society, when it is not idealized, glamorized or sensationalized; it is fake and inauthentic when it is accepted by society, as in the case of pornography, and when it is sensationalized, as in the fun of gambling and the glitter of Las Vegas. It is genuine when it is not "manufactured" as it was in the past by using "the excuse of a mythological theme to render a naked body or naked landscape, meaning them to be obscene" (*SN*, 108–9). It is genuine, in effect, when it is deliberate (self-conscious), vital (sparks the feeling of being inwardly alive), implicitly critical (of what is behind the scene), and most of all, uncanny. Art

utilizes "freshly obscene methods" (*SN*, 110). It strikes an internal chord in the viewer without preaching, instructing, or (re-)educating.

What Kuspit seems to be saying is that obscene art moves us by its unpredictability, subtlety, and ambiguity. An unclear message is preferable to an obvious one. A thought-provoking work is better than one that does the thinking for us. Obscene art is neither didactic nor propagandistic. It resists universalizing, since its particular message is neither clear nor isolable enough to be expanded upon or generalized. The message, therefore, cannot detract from the form. Thus, obscene art escapes the two charges that lead to a loss of aesthetic value. Kuspit perpetuates the tradition by pitting aesthetic against nonaesthetic properties, giving value to the aesthetic over the nonaesthetic, and by maintaining that aesthetic value results in an experience of pleasure (or delight to the senses).

Consider his prime example: Manet's 1863 painting, *Olympia*. According to Kuspit, Manet's method is interpreted as "descriptive," "ironical," and "coolly analytic in tone." Manet is said to have "no moral opinion about the participants in the scene" but rather records what he sees before him as a "neutral observer." He does not "generalize about society as a whole." In other words, Kuspit might say, Manet provoked thought without promoting a particular message. He did not try to reeducate nor to impose his personal morality universally on others. Since the artist's attitude to the social or moral content of the work "is as important as that content itself, indeed, more important artistically," and since Manet's "moral interest is filtered through an aesthetic of ironical indifference," Kuspit concludes that "in the end, Manet's picture seems of greater aesthetic than moral interest" (*AMI*, 18). If Manet were to have made the "perverse" mistake of moralizing, he would have been utilizing art in a "fundamentally inappropriate way" (*AMI*, 19). Thus, Kuspit's reading sees Manet's work as intentionally obscene: designed to be deliberate, vital, implicitly critical, and uncanny without promoting one universalizable message.[25]

Surely this work is valuable, but given conventional usage, is it what we would ordinarily call obscene? It is difficult to see how, on Kuspit's view, "obscene" is the most appropriate term to apply to artworks that aesthetically please the senses and heal the self. Perhaps a more commonplace and less idiosyncratic meaning can be borrowed from Joel Feinberg: "Obscenity is an extreme form of offensiveness producing repugnance, shock, or disgust, though the offending materials *can* (paradoxically) be to some degree alluring at the same time."[26] According to Feinberg, works of art can be offensive for a variety of reasons: "The work might, for example, be trite, hackneyed,

exploitative, imitative, cheap or vulgar, and these features might bore, anger, even disgust us."[27] Such works—also labeled "crass, bare, unveiled, rank, coarse, raw, shocking, blunt and stark"—approach the "outer limit of vulgarity."[28] On this view, obscenity is a thing or occasion to be avoided. Kuspit's approach, on the other hand, is a call for more obscenity. It yields the untenable conclusion that obscene art is both offensive and humanitarian! Though healing of the self may take place under these conditions, it seems unlikely. Offensiveness does not seem to be a good predictor of benefits, whether for individuals or humanity in general. Obscene art, as offensive art, is not humanitarian.

Furthermore, the promotion of artworks that are exciting, lively, and uncanny need not involve invoking the adjective "obscene," unless, perhaps, the aim is to titillate the viewer with exaggerated critical jargon, a critic's ploy to entice the viewer with the promise of obscenity where none really exists.[29] One might object that this is merely a dispute over terminology. Perhaps so, though Kuspit's promotion of obscene art goes beyond innovative vocabulary. In what follows, I hope to show the seriousness of the consequences of his view of art, regardless of whether nonactivist art is called obscene or not.

Nonobscene Art: Kuspit's Examples of Activist Art

Kuspit might respond to the above challenge by asking, "So, what's in a name?" He could conceivably sidestep the entire issue by claiming that the word "obscene" is not what's really at issue here; what matters is that some type of art—call it obscene or not—is still the only art that has aesthetic and humanitarian value, as opposed to activist art, which lacks it. Upon closer inspection, however, the very examples of activist art cited as lacking in value can be shown to possess aesthetic value. (Since the focus of the remainder of this essay is aesthetic value, I shall not pursue the issue of humanitarian value any further.) The examples show that Kuspit is perpetuating a version of the traditional aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction by claiming that these works fall short of having aesthetic value, which is their *primary* value. As he applied this traditional approach to his analysis of Manet's *Olympia,* he now extends it to cover cases of activist art.

One can easily make the counterclaim to Kuspit that activist art does not lack aesthetic value simply because it combines message and medium nor because we disagree or disapprove of its message. But in order to do so, a

new approach to assessing aesthetic value needs to be constructed: one that does not simply rely on the well-rehearsed approach of Beardsley or Sibley, focusing on the unity, intensity, complexity, delicacy, balance, or other aesthetic features. Kuspit's emphasis on art *delighting* and *pleasing* the senses must be dropped as well as the traditional requirement that a work be viewed disinterestedly. Because activist works of art rarely seek to cause aesthetic pleasure and can rarely be experienced disinterestedly, the traditional characterization should be seen for what it really is: limited and limiting. Upholding the distinction between aesthetic and nonaesthetic value, then, without its traditional supporting structure, means that only the tradition's focus on formal properties is retained. Let us look more closely at Kuspit's examples for new ways of determining aesthetic value along these lines.

In one sense, Kuspit casts the net too wide when he attempts to determine the scope of aesthetic value. The black paintings of Ross Bleckner are perhaps Kuspit's prime example;[30] he believes they definitively justify his stand against activist art since they are nonrepresentational and stand on their own "as essentially aesthetic art." He sees Bleckner's stipulation that they are memorials to persons with AIDS as a "defensive posture," a desperate move to "justify an art that needs no justification" (*AMI,* 21). They stand on their own merits—aesthetically—without additional contextual information that ties them to a moral or political purpose. Once tied, they lose their implicit, vital, deliberate, and uncanny nature and become explicit, nonvital, nondeliberate, and canny. Their message becomes obvious (thereby detracting from the formal properties of the work) and odious (since Kuspit objects to any message being promoted and universalized by an artist). These factors contribute to their loss of aesthetic value.

But how can this be? How can an artwork considered to have aesthetic value, come to lose it just because a viewer learns something new about it, as in this case, that it has a message? Nothing has changed visually, of course; the viewer has merely gained more knowledge about the piece. Bleckner's work, like the case of the Charpentier painting mistaken for the Met's David, is considered to lose value because of contextual information. Somehow this seems at odds with the basic (traditional) nature of aesthetic value, which depends primarily upon formal properties. Contextual information should not affect the rise and fall of aesthetic value, although it could affect some other type of value, for example, the work's monetary or political value. Thus, Kuspit's tendency to expand the parameters of aesthetic value to include contextual information goes beyond the traditional sense in order to provide a justification to devalue certain works.

But he also casts the net too narrowly, when he restricts the sense of aesthetic value to exclude works by the "self-proclaimed neo-moral realists" like Adrian Piper, Jenny Holzer, and Barbara Kruger (*AMI,* 19). Holzer's and Kruger's works are considered the result of "emulative, even identificative envy of entertainment's mass appeal and enormous social effect: the work of artists who hope to be socially accepted with aesthetically inferior art" (*AMI,* 21). To assume, however, that art that has mass appeal or attempts to influence society on a grand scale is necessarily inferior on aesthetic grounds is to confuse its effect on viewers with its cause (its internal composition). There are many examples of artworks that have had a major impact and mass appeal yet are still considered aesthetically valuable. Ironically, *Olympia* is one such work. Again, Kuspit is mistaken in thinking that contextual information—knowing that the artist aimed for mass appeal (whether successful or not)—is relevant to determining the aesthetic value of the work (though, again, it may affect other values). What, then, counts as aesthetic value in these works, that might counter Kuspit's charge that they are "aesthetically inferior art"?

Holzer is known for producing individual, legible Truisms as well as rapidly moving texts in her signature medium, the LED (light-emitting diode).[31] Her truisms ("RAISE BOYS AND GIRLS THE SAME WAY," "FATHERS OFTEN USE TOO MUCH FORCE," "YOUR OLDEST FEARS ARE THE WORST ONES") are found primarily outside gallery installations, appearing as electronic billboards in Times Square and Las Vegas, in shopping malls, airports, and printed on T-shirts. Barbara Kruger also combines image and text in a variety of mediums.[32] And like Holzer, she often displays outside the typical gallery scene—on billboards, subway stations, T-shirts, canvas shopping bags, pencils, and even rubber stamps. Most of her works are photomontages with text ("I SHOP, THEREFORE I AM," "YOUR MANIAS BECOME SCIENCE," "WHEN I HEAR THE WORD 'CULTURE' I TAKE OUT MY CHECKBOOK") consisting of black-and-white photographs (usually close-ups) of persons or fragmented images of persons on which the text is superimposed. At other times her work consists entirely of words: words printed on the floor in a gallery or words silk-screened onto vinyl panels.

The aesthetic nature of these works rests on the fact that words become the aesthetic medium as well as functioning as the nonaesthetic medium by which the message is conveyed. Thus, they can be experienced and evaluated in two ways: by aesthetic criteria alone or by criteria that seek to locate the value of the entire experience in the meaning of the words, as they are expressed by a particular person within a particular setting. The former is purely visual, looking at the text as an arrangement of formal properties

without attending to meaning, while the latter is more cognitive, reading the text for the message being conveyed.

Consider the traditional approach, which encourages looking at formal properties and the way they affect the senses and cause aesthetic pleasure by ignoring the content of the words used. By placing her text "Lack of charisma can be . . . fatal" in two successive stages on the marquee of Caesar's Palace, Holzer provides a visual experience that partakes in, yet provides commentary upon, the glitter of the avenue. Likewise, her display of writings in *Untitled* (1989), which consisted of a 535-foot electronic sign that spiraled up the outer face of the Guggenheim Museum's parapet wall, became part of the graceful and sensual curved lines of architecture. Her most somber works, such as *Laments* (1987), place electronic signboards in a darkened room with granite sarcophagi. Sensations of death—cool, calm, and dark—are perceivable in advance of and in spite of reading the text.

In fact, if one were illiterate or if the artists used an unknown or indecipherable language, their works could still move us aesthetically. Holzer's most artificial and elaborate environments literally bombard the senses by creating intensely colorful, charged, electrified spaces. For instance, *The Last Room* (Fig. 11.2)—one of four created for the U.S. Pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1990—contained rapidly moving text in five different languages and multiple color combinations and type styles. Described as "an assault on the senses," its hallucinatory effects clearly surpassed any message that one was able to derive, given the fast-paced movement of the text and the fact that most persons cannot understand five different languages.[33] Similarly, experiencing Kruger's work with the text in a foreign language—as in the work KEIN GEDANKE/KEIN ZWEIFEL/KEINE GUTE/KEIN VERGNÜGEN/KEIN LACHEN (NO THOUGHT/ NO DOUBT/NO GOODNESS/NO PLEASURE/NO LAUGHTER)—shows that determining its aesthetic value can clearly be independent of the content of the message for those who cannot read German. But can one really evaluate these works fairly by ignoring their message, by looking at them merely as formal exercises, by ignoring the fact that they are works by women that comment on the power structures of a world in which women fail to occupy privileged positions? I think not.

Consider the alternative approach, which looks into the meaning of these texts as statements of particular persons within a particular setting. The words, when read *as* text, are neither trivial nor soothing. In fact, they stand in harsh contrast to the delight and pleasure they bring to the senses (to use Kuspit's terms) when one experiences them merely as light, color, and in Holzer's case, movement, that is, as formal properties. Switching from one

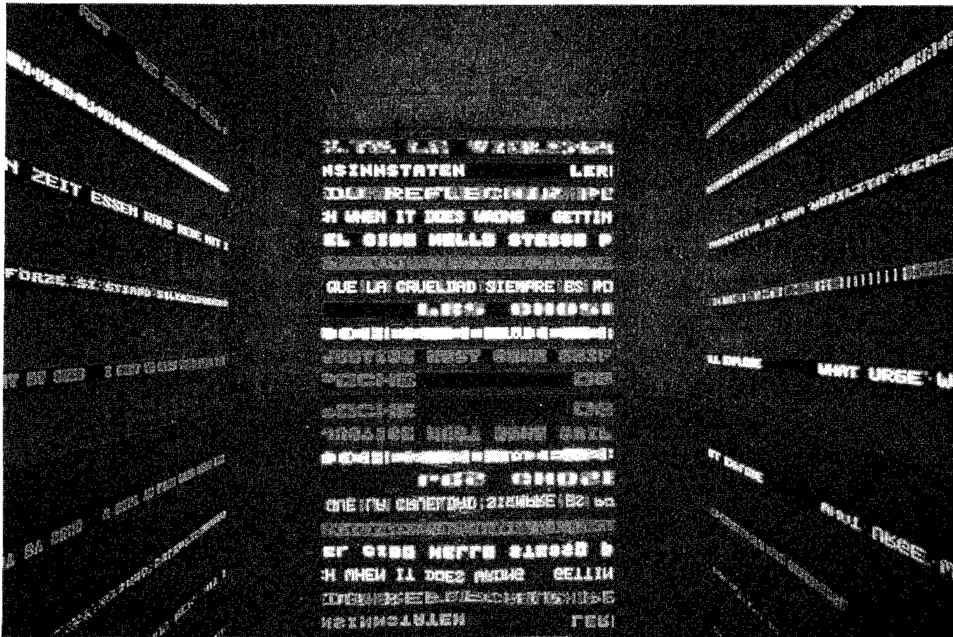

Fig. 11.2. Jenny Holzer, *Untitled (The Last Room)*. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

mode to the other (like switching from the duck to the rabbit in the famous duck-rabbit image) forces the viewer to drastically change criteria by which to judge them. Some of Holzer's strongest text, in *Untitled* (*The Child's Room*) (Fig. 11.3), includes ruminations on the birth of her daughter, the pain she will experience, the wrenching apart of mother and daughter that is physical at birth and then psychological as the daughter matures. The meaning of this work cannot be appreciated by simply watching light bulbs flicker on and off in aesthetically pleasing ways. A woman-centered aesthetic informs the meaning of this work: one that diverges from typical birth scenes painted by males who have rarely chosen to portray the act of birth, the pain of birth, or the separation and anxiety that follows.[34] One need only recall the numerous nativity scenes of the birth of Christ to reconstruct the backdrop to Holzer's work, scenes that place a happy, but poor family in a manger, beautiful and beatified. This backdrop, to which we are so accustomed, urges us to distinguish and appreciate nativity scenes for the aesthetic properties they express: the composition, the color, the proportions of the figures. Understanding Holzer's work, as in the case of Judy Chicago's *Birth Project,* depends

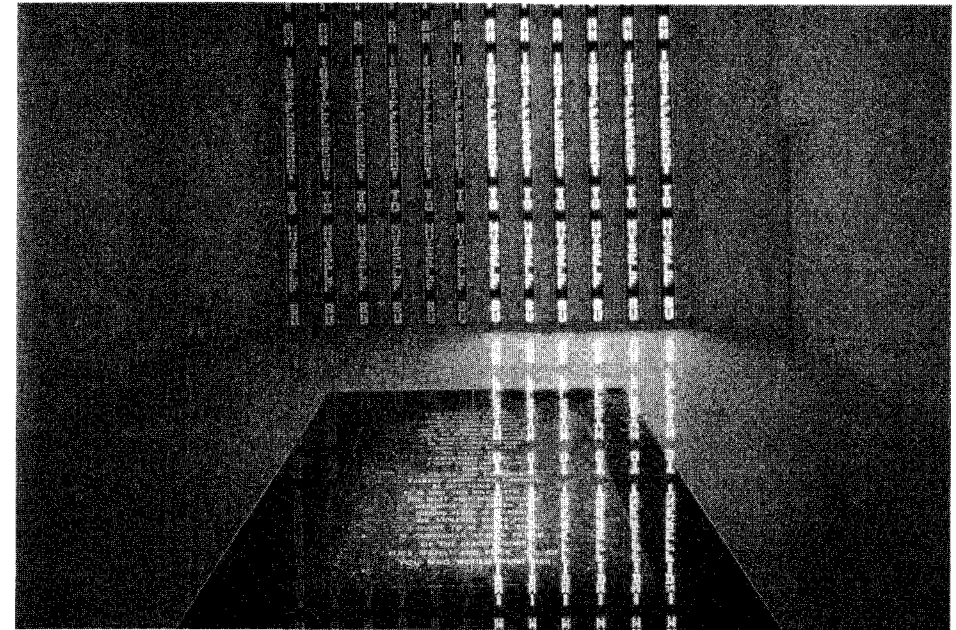

Fig. 11.3. Jenny Holzer, *Untitled (The Child's Room)*. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

on assuming an aesthetic that does not rest on the notion of aesthetic distancing or aesthetic pleasure, both anathema to the maternal stance under scrutiny.[35]

The same holds true for Kruger. Many of her works are crucially located in a woman's point of view and express a feminist sentiment that is simply unavailable by looking at her works as black-and-white designs. It is impossible to understand a text like YOUR BODY IS A BATTLEGROUND (Fig. 11.4) superimposed upon a bisected woman's face without reflecting upon the actuality that abortion is a woman's problem but the legality of abortion rights is decided primarily by men. The treatment of women's bodies—whether they are under a woman's own control or whether they are appropriated and controlled by religion, by male artists, or by lawmakers—is essential to a feminist aesthetic. Kuspit's charge that these works are aesthetically inferior because they appeal to the masses (by this, we presume, he sometimes means masses of women) reveals his reliance on the myopic traditional approach to assessing aesthetic value and his resistance to moving beyond the tradition to incorporate new

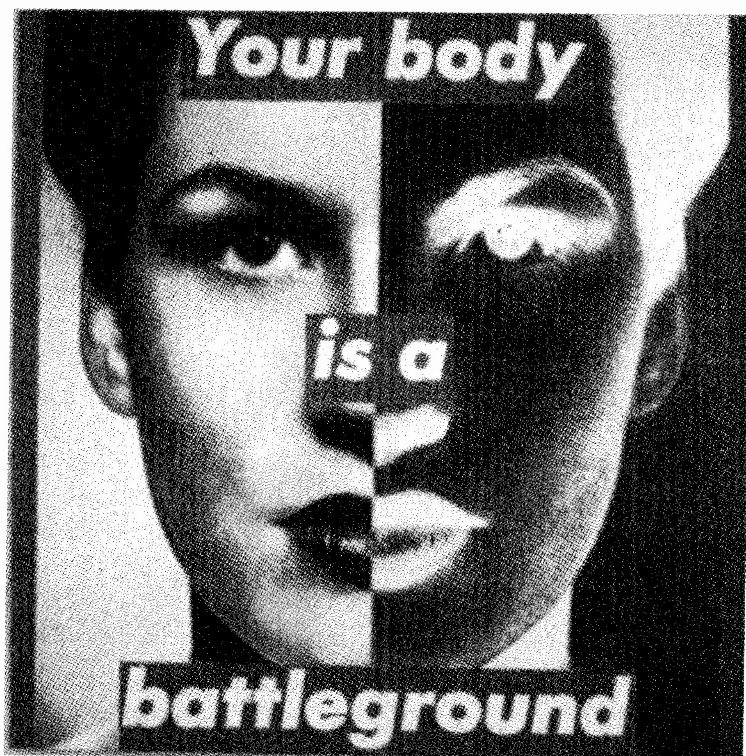

Fig. 11.4. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground),* 1989. Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery, New York

avenues of approach. His entrenched view gives us a glimpse of how a commissar of the obscene might actually function in the artworld.

Adrian Piper: Expanding Aesthetic Values

Kuspit considers Adrian Piper's works, known for challenging the viewer on issues of race and gender, "pseudo-intellectual" (*AMI,* 21). Though he fails to elaborate on this charge, the most plausible reading of his criticism is that her work, like Kruger's and Holzer's, is aesthetically inferior because it contains a message and the message is too strong, thereby failing to be obscene (vital, deliberate, implicit, and uncanny). It is true that Piper's methods are not

usually considered subtle, since her message—to provide "the potential for furnishing a forceful antidote to racism"—is anything but subtle.[36] In spite of acknowledging the function art *can* serve aesthetically, she readily admits that she has no interest in art that aims to increase aesthetic pleasure—what she calls "Easy Listening Art" (the art of postmodernism): "It is the art that recalls and celebrates the familiar Euroethnic history and canon of art, that reassures one with its familiar and witty strategies of form and content, that minutely refines or dilates upon those strategies in ways that serve to increase our aesthetic pleasure in recognizing and discerning minor modifications in what we have already learned."[37] Rather than rehashing artistic conventions of the past, she is more concerned with educating viewers to their long-standing prejudices—both aesthetic and nonaesthetic. Consider some examples.

An early drawing, *Self-Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features* (1981), is described by Lowery Sims (one of Piper's most able spokespersons) as engaging the "conflicting standards of beauty and social acceptance on the most intimate level." It confronts the viewer with the visual imagery of "black is beautiful."[38] A performance piece entitled *The Mythic Being* (1974–75), in which Piper donned a mustache and an Afro wig to masquerade as a black male, explored the additional issue of gender by which "the visual impact of blackness . . . poses not only a social threat but also an aesthetic one."[39] In both pieces, issues of race and gender are raised that the traditional approach to aesthetic value is inadequate to handle. A viewer cannot respond disinterestedly and aesthetic pleasure is not the issue. What is at issue is assessing the aesthetic value of blackness and the beauty of blacks as it diverges from the traditional criteria of aesthetic value (disinterestedness and pleasure). As Sims aptly puts it: "Grounded as her work is in the contemplation of the black female body, it cannot—and does not—avoid raising the question of how to receive the conventions of black physicality within the canons of [white] beauty."[40]

Two works, in particular, serve to elucidate Piper's deliberate expansion of the aesthetic. (The transcripts of these two pieces appear in Chapter 10.) The first is a work from 1980 entitled *Four Intruders Plus Alarm System* (see Fig. 10.1). It is a mixed-media installation made up of four silk-screen lightboxes each measuring seven feet high that make up the interior of a small cylindrical room six feet in diameter. As one enters the room, which is painted black and excludes all external light, one encounters four 18″ by 24″ silk-screened images, hung at eye level, lit from behind. The images are representations of four hostile-looking African American males staring directly at the viewer, lit behind the eyes. The music and lyrics of "Night People," from the black

musical group War, can be heard from a hidden speaker. The viewer is provided with four headphones. In each of four monologues, Piper speaks as the voice of an imaginary art viewer who responds to the work based on ideological defenses that are triggered involuntarily at the sight of a black man: "Here I was concerned to articulate and isolate certain racist stereotypes of black men (aggressive, hostile, malevolent), and also a set of paradigmatic racist responses to those perceived stereotypes."

The four responses offered here include: (1) the aestheticizing response, which ignores political content in favor of formalist concerns ("I'm looking for an aesthetic experience; something that I can judge in terms of aesthetic standards, and this is just not that aesthetically interesting"); (2) the appropriating response in which the viewer claims to be victimized by oppression as well ("I can really get into this. . . . I can really understand black anger, because, like, I'm really angry, too. . . . I've had some real bad problems, you know . . . I feel like I've been ripped off by this society, too"); (3) the liberal response, which blames racism on the rest of society ("I'm simply antagonized by the hostility of this piece. . . . I have the feeling that the artist is just really distorting reality. . . . She's representing all blacks as completely hostile and alienated, and I just think that that's not true. . . . I wouldn't advise my daughter to marry one, that's true. But it's not . . . because I'm a racist"); and (4) what Piper calls the "redneck" response ("This certainly doesn't bring me any closer to the uh, the so-called black experience. . . . I feel that anger is being expressed at me for things that have nothing to do with me. . . . I resent being made the focus of that kind of anger, as though somehow it was my fault").

A second work similar to *Four Intruders* is *Safe* (1990; see Fig. 10.2). This piece consists of a number of black-and-white photographs of African Americans, posed as in a family group portrait. This time they are smiling. In the background, one hears an aria from Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* which is Peter's plea for mercy after his three denials of Christ. Piper again assumes the voice of art viewer in the taped monologue but instead of separating the four types of racist response by means of different tapes, they are combined on one tape. Once again she speaks for the imaginary viewer, reiterating the traditional criteria (in fact, Kuspit's criteria of implicitness and ambiguity!) for assessing aesthetic value:

> I just don't feel comfortable with this . . . I feel manipulated . . . stared at . . . *laughed* at. . . . All these sardonic smiles! . . . it's just too explicit. . . . Personally I think understatement would've been the way to go here . . . a kind of subtle ambiguity, . . . the problem is that this piece gives me no aesthetic space . . . there's just no way you can avoid the message here . . . it leaves no room for interpretation, for use of the imagination, for flights of fancy, you know?

In both these works, Piper incorporates expected viewers' reactions *in* the work: anticipating them, questioning them, and attacking them *before* they occur. She skillfully places viewers in a Catch-22 situation of not being able to safely respond. If our initial, unpreventable gut reactions are racist, sexist, or classist in some way, she has accurately predicted them and makes them public. If we attempt to formulate less racist, sexist, or classist responses and instead opt for the safer aesthetic response, we're accused of feigning disinterestedness and searching in vain for a feeling of aesthetic pleasure. We become the object of viewing, nearly replacing the art object in importance. We are viewed by the artist as we view ourselves struggling to overcome our unacceptable reactions and undergo change. By speaking *as* viewer, Piper invests the work with a sense and recognition of her self: as African American and as a woman within a nonblack-, nonfemale-dominated (art)world. According to one critic, Piper's focus on the self is a reflection of her work in Kantian ethics as she continues to seek "a model of the self that a theory of the good society might presuppose."[41]

In setting us up in this way and in our reflection upon the manipulation of our responses, Piper uses her art to reject two of the three basic notions of traditional aesthetic value: its being rooted in a cool, detached, disinterested stance and its resulting in aesthetic pleasure or gratification of some sort. The reactions she anticipates are not aesthetic reactions but rather emotional, political, psychological, and cultural ones. Her point is that try as one might to remain neutral and distanced, one cannot avoid reacting to confrontational issues of gender or race *with* interest. For her, there is no pure aesthetic attitude one can take toward her work. The practical and the personal cannot be put on hold. The ideal experience of a work is "an interactive process" in which the viewer constructs an interpretation based on her level of political self-awareness at the time. She then comes to alter her interpretation upon reflection of this level of self-awareness, adding to a more enlightened interpretation of the work—more importantly—a less racist self. The process is therefore seen as "inherently catalytic."[42]

Thus her works separate aesthetic response from its accompanying notion of pleasure as well as from presumptions of distanced, disinterested response. Kuspit's charge that the work is pseudointellectual betrays his traditionalist

tendencies to resist Piper's expansion of the term "aesthetic" into new realms of value. What Kuspit fails to appreciate—thereby denigrating her work as *pseudo*intellectual—is the extent to which Piper seeks to demarcate a separate aesthetics of color that broadens the traditional limits of the aesthetic beyond its normal confines. Issues of black versus white beauty, color (in art) as a reflection of the color of the artist and viewer, and the myth of a pure colorless, genderless aesthetic response move the boundaries of the aesthetic beyond the narrowness of disinterestedness and pleasure and into more complex arenas previously unappreciated. Feminist aesthetics, black aesthetics, ethno-aesthetics, Indian (that is, Native American) aesthetics, are instances of new terminology that seek to redefine the parameters of the aesthetic based on artworks by women and artists of color. Such extensions may be perceived as threatening to the tradition of a white male aesthetic—to be summarily ignored or dismissed—or may be perceived as a welcome and long overdue improvement.[43] In any case, they cast doubt on Kuspit's claims that activist art lacks aesthetic value simply because it seeks to convey a deliberate and explicit message.

The aesthetic value, then, of works like Kruger's, Holzer's, and Piper's is rooted in the tradition but is drastically different in character. Perhaps an analogy will help. Suppose a person has grown up eating American fast food and has acquired a taste for hamburgers, fries, and soft drinks and has no sense of savoring the nuances of flavors, no delicacy of taste. He then travels to another country, tastes the local fare, and—not surprisingly—decides it's unpalatable. He is, however, stuck in this country for months on end and has no choice but to continue sampling the regional cuisine. After some time, it becomes palatable, though not necessarily pleasurable. He begins to notice the subtlety of flavors; in effect, his taste changes from that to which he was accustomed to a new and radically different sort. For that person, there is no turning back, that is, he can no longer evaluate the food of his old eating habits in anything like the same old way.[44]

I am proposing that looking at the art of Holzer, Kruger, and Piper includes such a mind-shift of this sort and that it is difficult to discern the aesthetic value of their work because we are accustomed to looking for aesthetic value in other, very entrenched ways. We are habituated, in effect, by the way we have learned about art in the past, that is, by the numerous works of "the great masters." Repeated exposure to those works (and only those works) establishes a pattern of likes and dislikes, tastes and tolerances, that results in our developing a taste for only those items sampled so far: the Western, male-

dominated history of art. (Consider how the viewing of films made by white males has similarly affected viewing audiences.)

But the artworld has much more to offer. Works of art by women and artists of color, though unfamiliar to a traditional Western taste, extend the range of our experiences beyond those we've come to know. Naturally, our first tastes are unpredictable. Our first reactions are often negative. We need to come to learn the aesthetic of such works by sampling them over and over again, by learning their ways and what unique aspects they have to offer. In some instances we may even come to value those experiences over the ones with which we grew up. We may even come to reject our old tastes in favor of the new. In any case, we can no longer view works in old ways. Exposure to new tastes inevitably impinges on our judgment of the works on which we were raised.

Sampling the artworld is *unlike* living in a foreign country, however, in that one can always retreat to one's old ways and give up the adventure of new tastes. When women artists were first introduced into art history texts, faculty often refused to teach them and retreated to the tradition they knew best. By avoiding the new and unfamiliar, they never learned to acquire a taste for them. Unlike being immersed in a foreign country, one always has the choice to return to the masters and to continue to sample the same old fare. It takes less effort to do so than to learn to value a feminist aesthetic or a black aesthetic. We need only look to the way unusual artifacts have been treated in the past to understand how they continue to be treated: for instance, the way turn-of-the-century artists like Picasso "appreciated" African artifacts. Such objects were not embraced in order to be understood for the unique values they expressed but rather were appropriated for the benefits they could bring to a burgeoning modernist movement and artists' careers.

My suggestion is that those of us trained in the tradition can only half-heartedly come to appreciate Asian art or Native American art unless we work at immersing ourselves in the aesthetic particular to the piece and continually strive to learn about it. A feminist aesthetic would attribute value to the works of Holzer, Kruger, or Piper *because* they diverge from the white, male viewpoint. Formal properties remain central to the work and one can choose to assess them in a Beardsleyan way. But there's more going on than meets the eye. These formal properties, rearranged in new and different ways, can be better understood and evaluated *as* they are informed by a feminist, black, Chicana, or Asian American aesthetic. One must come to appreciate these ways by turning away from the valuing of formal properties for their own sake and looking at them as indications of a viewpoint that seeks to restore dignity

and pride in the accomplishments of artists of color and women. Thus, in expanding the traditional notion of aesthetic value beyond its usual confines, we come to have the option of many types of aesthetic values by which to evaluate more fairly the wide range of works available for us to sample.

Conclusion

I have attempted to critique Kuspit's denunciation of activist art by examining the underlying assumptions of his use of the term "aesthetic value." I have shown that expressing doubts about his endorsement of obscenity is more than just a superficial quibble over terminology; rather, it exposes modes of exclusion that masquerade as standards of aesthetic value.

Kuspit's own examples were used *against* him as counterexamples to his basic claim that only obscene art has aesthetic value. They have functioned as more than just counterexamples, however, as they point to serious flaws with any approach to art—anti-activist or otherwise—based on the traditional aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction. In looking at the three foci of the aesthetic—its identification with formal properties, its insistence on a disinterested relationship between object and viewer, and its culminating effect of aesthetic pleasure—we find that two out of the three are not retained in a new, revised view of aesthetic value. Thus, the aesthetic need not rest on a disinterested stance and aesthetic pleasure need not result. Most important, aesthetic value need not take precedence over nonaesthetic. A revised sense of the aesthetic, on the contrary, is one that is neither narrowly circumscribed nor exclusionary.

We must become accustomed to relying upon more than one single, monolithic sense of "aesthetic" as established by the tradition. If a feminist sense of aesthetic value emerges as well as a black sense as well as a Native American sense, then so be it. Perhaps it was naive ever to think that one, universal sense of aesthetic value could ever be achieved. To the art lover worried about the proliferation of standards of aesthetic value ad infinitum, one reply is that it is inevitable that different senses will overlap and that some will become obsolete as new ones emerge. A feminist aesthetic, for instance, could encompass an aesthetic of color or class, though there are inherent difficulties in this approach that have already been enumerated.[45] These issues will need to be sorted out in the future as various types of art come to the fore and are experienced and discussed by more and more persons.

Jazz is not evaluated in the same way as Brahms. Chinese art cannot be understood by studying Western art. The films of Spike Lee enrich the dialogue begun with *Birth of a Nation* and move it in directions previously unforeseen. The novels of N. Scott Momaday, Toni Morrison, and Amy Tan spark new realms of evaluative criteria based on the importance of one's origins, an oral tradition, one's tie to the land and feelings of exclusion from the dominant race and its inherent patriarchy. The mention of all these works in the same space is not meant to conflate their differences nor to trivialize them, but rather to point to the essential need for developing informed and coherent sets of criteria for determining the values of each work. Philosophical aesthetics can help by moving away from the rigidity of the traditional aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction and toward a revised notion (or more appropriately, notions) of aesthetic value.

Finally, to be fair to the art being evaluated, such notions ought to grow out of the context from which the art comes rather than be appropriated by those of us trained *in* the tradition. Philosophers and critics need to hear and study the voices of Holzer, Kruger, Piper, Sims, and others who seek to delineate new senses of aesthetic value. Our job is not to silence them as commissars of the obscene are charged by Kuspit to do. Our job, as persons who value the arts, is to become more open to their voices and their art, as we seek to avoid all forms of exclusionism.

Notes

1. George Dickie's essay was originally published in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 56–66, and has been reprinted in a number of anthologies. Nelson Goodman's views can be found in *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968) and *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

2. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Putnam, 1958), 27. (Originally published in 1914.)

3. Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958). He added a postscript in 1980, prior to the second edition of 1981.

4. Monroe Beardsley, "The Aesthetic Point of View," *Contemporary Philosophic Thought* 3 (1970), reprinted in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics,* ed. John W. Bender and H. Gene Blocker (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 384–96.

5. Four of the five features, including the first, must be present for an experience to count as aesthetic. "In Defense of Aesthetic Value," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 52 (1979), reprinted in Bender and Blocker, eds., *Contemporary Philosophy of Art,* 402–6.

6. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking,* 57–70; and Beardsley, "In Defense of Aesthetic Value," in Bender and Blocker, eds., *Contemporary Philosophy of Art,* 405.

7. As I argue in "Feminism in Context: A Role for Feminist Theory in Aesthetic Evaluation,"

Beardsley never satisfactorily defeats this less severe characterization of the Moralist position, the Argument from Correlation, which holds that Moralists grant the existence of a separate form of aesthetic value but do not make it dependent upon or correlated to moral value. See Bender and Blocker, eds., *Contemporary Philosophy of Art,* 106–21.

8. See my essay "Evaluating Art: A Feminist Case for Dickie's Matrix System," in *Institutions of Art: Reconsiderations of George Dickie's Philosophy,* ed. Robert Yanal (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 87–107.

9. There are many texts chronicling the "forgotten" history of women artists, most notably Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981). See notes 10 and 12 below.

10. Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists, 1550–1950* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 107. The quote is by Claude Philips.

11. Cited in Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses,* 8. The quote is from an essay entitled "Women Painters," *Saturday Book* (1964):19.

12. Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 142. Greer notes that earlier evaluations considered the work to be "a perfect picture, unforgettable."

13. Patricia Failing, "Black Artists Today: A Case of Exclusion," *ARTnews* 88 (March 1989): 124–31. A postscript to this from the entertainment world is the report that MTV, in its first two years on the air, refused to air video clips by African American artists; see Daryl Chin, "Multiculturalism and Its Masks: The Art of Identity Politics," *Performing Arts Journal* 40 (January 1992): 1–15.

14. Failing, "Black Artists Today," 130.

15. Ibid. At best (the Whitney Museum of American Art), 7 percent of the artists shown from 1980 to 1987 were non-European or of non-European descent. At worst (the Guggenheim, from 1980 to 1985), no minority artists were shown. In the all-important Whitney Biennials from 1973 to 1987, only 4.4 percent were artists of color (although not even one Native American qualified in the entire time), and from 1981 to 1987 there were no one-person shows of black, Hispanic, or Native American painters or sculptors at the Whitney. The 1993 Biennial did include some Native Americans and artists of color.

16. Lowery Stokes Sims, "The New Exclusionism," *Art Papers* 12, no. 4 (July–August 1988): 37–38. The exclusionism is "new" in contrast to the exclusion of blacks in the history of art: see, for example, Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990); and Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art,* 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

17. The speaker, Patterson Sims, notes, however, that "the curatorial staff was entirely white when I worked there." See Failing, "Black Artists Today."

18. Hilton Kramer, "Does Feminism Conflict with Artistic Standards?" *New York Times,* 27 January 1980, 1, 27. He continues, "The unstated implication [is], I suppose, that hard-headed critical judgment must be suspended until that heavenly day yonder when men and women achieve—in art, as in everything else—some ideal parity of talent, power and opportunity."

19. See Deborah Solomon's "The Art World Bust," *New York Times Magazine,* 28 February 1993, 32.

20. This was Barbara Barr's "Reply to Piper," in *Women Artists News* 12, no. 2 (June 1987): 6, upon hearing her talk about the 1988 work *Cornered.* Part of Piper's text is as follows: "I embody the racist's nightmare, the obscenity of miscegenation, the reminder that segregation has never been a fully functional concept, that sexual desire penetrates social and racial barriers, and reproduces itself. . . . I represent the loathsome possibility that all of you are 'tainted' by black ancestry. If someone can look and sound like me and still be black, who is safely white?"

21. One response to the feminist version of the Argument from Reduction is the challenge to distinguish between the differing values of politically acceptable works, for instance, between a variety of quilts celebrating women's lives. Since there is no way to value one over another except by formal properties, the distinction should not be dropped.

22. Eleanor Hartley, "Cindy Sherman at Metro Pictures," *Art in America* 89, no. 9 (September 1992): 127–28. In a review of Sherman's recent work consisting of color photos of mannequin parts, masks, and assorted props, Hartley states: "In one of the most terrifying photos [*Untitled* (1992)], the mask of an old crone is attached to a legless mannequin whose torso is covered with a shield composed of the fully rounded breasts and belly of a pregnant woman. Extruding from this hybrid female's vagina is a string of brown sausages." Hartley praises Sherman as follows: "There is something brave about her willingness to grapple with some of the most unpleasant realities of the human condition. At a moment when self-righteousness pervades the art world, she opts for truths that are not sugar-coated."

23. Donald Kuspit, "Art and the Moral Imperative: Analyzing Activist Art," *New Art Examiner* (January 1991), 18–25, hereafter *AMI.*

24. Donald Kuspit, "A Sceptical Note on the Idea of the Moral Imperative in Contemporary Art," *Art Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1991): 106–12, hereafter *SN.*

25. It is important to note that Olympia stands as a paradigm of aesthetic value only when interpreted in a certain way. One would presume that Kuspit would reject a Marxist or feminist reading, as well as one that points to the difference in color between the prostitute and her maid.

26. Joel Feinberg, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law,* Vol. 2, *Offense to Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 123.

27. Ibid., 120.

28. Ibid., 109.

29. Moreover, the term loses its force as Kuspit recommends not only that art be obscene, but also that criticism be bent "to its own obscene purpose" as it acknowledges "the obscenity of every canon" (*SN,* 112).

30. Though neither female nor a minority, Bleckner is vital to the discussion at hand.

31. See Michael Auping, *Jenny Holzer* (New York: Universe, 1992).

32. See Kate Linker, *Love for Sale: The Words and Pictures of Barbara Kruger* (New York: Abrams, 1990).

33. Auping, *Jenny Holzer,* 62–67. The work consisted of a medium-sized room with eleven flashing three-color LED signs, each approximately fifteen feet long and nine inches high, flanked by two walls, each supporting five horizontal three-color LED signs, twenty feet long and five inches high. Auping reports some viewers experiencing physical reactions to the piece: nausea, vertigo, and severe mood changes. "Many found it difficult to maintain their equilibrium—the intense reflection on the marble floor created the illusion of a deep hole into which the language seemed to fall infinitely away."

34. Marc Chagall's series of birth paintings is an exception to men's avoidance of this imagery.

35. Judy Chicago, *The Birth Project* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985).

36. See commentary by Adrian Piper in *Pretend,* an exhibition catalogue of Piper's works (New York: Colorstone Printing, 1990).

37. Ibid. She adds, "[It] is meant to be looked at rather than seen. . . . It does not make trouble; instead it makes nice."

38. Lowery Stokes Sims, "The Mirror, The Other: The Politics of Aesthetics," *Artforum* 28 (March 1990): 111–15.

39. Ibid. See also Hilton Als, "darling," *Artforum* 29 (March 1991): 100–104.

40. Sims, "The Mirror," 115.

41. See Thomas McEvilley's review of a show of Piper's work at the Alternative Museum in *Artforum* 26 (September 1987): 128–29. In addition to being a practicing artist, Piper currently teaches philosophy at Wellesley College.

42. Piper, *Pretend,* n.p.

43. Aside from the two special issues in 1990 on feminist aesthetics in the philosophical journals, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and *Hypatia,* and the recent publication of Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), philosophical aesthetics still remains relatively silent on these topics.

44. Another analogy is the person changing his diet due to a medical problem, for example, restricting salt intake over a period of time can result in a person's finding foods salty that previously tasted unsalty.

45. See, for instance, Elizabeth V. Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).

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