
Feminist Aesthetics

Controversies, Conflicts, and Contentions

Feminisms and Aesthetics

- ❖ When we speak of feminist aesthetic theories, we are really speaking of a variety of different approaches to thinking about the arts, all loosely arrayed under a single banner, but differing significantly in their approaches and areas of focus.
- ❖ This is as it should be, since feminism comprises a variety of diverse points of view, exhibiting healthy divergences of opinion.
- ❖ Most have in common, however, a heightened gender sensitivity to traditional questions in Aesthetics—how they are posed, what they presuppose, what they reveal about the interests of those who pose them—coupled with recommendations for reorientations.
- ❖ In this sense, importantly, feminist theorists may challenge various traditions in aesthetics, or, conversely, they may seek rather to embrace and supplement them in various ways.
 - ❖ As Hanson suggests, we may think of ‘similar goals, different theories’.

A Place to Begin

- ❖ Consider Linda Nochlin's seminal essay, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971)
 - ❖ First and most obvious response: er, there have been, across all genre of artistic endeavor.
 - ❖ Second, though, it is plainly true that historically women artists have been excluded from studios, from galleries, from music schools, from curatorial positions, from museums, from churches. . .
 - ❖ Nochlin takes aim at the tradition of celebrating the individual genius—as the godlike creator of the sublime—in favor of an understanding of art and its history as socially enmeshed, as co-operative, and as dynamically produced by whole institutions.
 - ❖ Her thought: feminist theories offer a framework for rethinking the preoccupations, preferences, and predilections of that gatekeepers of the great.

Er, there have been. . .

Marie Denise Villers,
Marie Joséphine Charlotte du Val d'Oignes (1801)

First attributed to Jacques Louis David, when exhibited
at the Salon, in Paris, 1801

ArtNews describes the portrait as 'perhaps the
greatest picture ever painted by a woman.'

Same again for Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassat



A Controversial Passage

There are no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol, any more than there are black American equivalents for the same. If there actually were large numbers of “hidden” great women artists, or if there really should be different standards for women’s art as opposed to men’s — and one can’t have it both ways — then what are feminists fighting for? If women have in fact achieved the same status as men in the arts, then the status quo is fine as it is.

But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class and above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education.

—Nochlin (1971)

Nochlin's Methodological Point

- ❖ She cites John Stuart Mill: 'Everything which is usual appears natural. The subjection of women to men being a universal custom, any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural.' (*On the Subjection of Women*, 1869).
- ❖ Nochlin observed: 'Those who have privileges invariably hold on to them. In reality the white-male-position-accepted-as-natural, or the hidden 'he' as the subject of all scholarly predicates — is a decided advantage, rather than merely a hindrance or a subjective distortion.'
- ❖ In art history, the white, Western male viewpoint is 'unconsciously accepted as the viewpoint of the art historian.'
- ❖ Nochlin argues that this presupposition is objectionable not only on moral and ethical grounds, but because it is intellectually inadequate—it obscures distorting assumptions in the study of art and its history.

One Divide: Gender Essentialism

- ❖ Lochlin is anti-essentialist in her outlook.
- ❖ Gender Essentialism vs. Anti-Gender Essentialism
 - ❖ Gender Essentialism: there are fixed, intrinsic, innate qualities to women and to men; these qualities are different, unavoidable, and inescapable.
 - ❖ On this approach, for a woman (or a man) to claim 'I choose not to be a woman (or a man).' is on par with a dog claiming 'I choose not to be an animal.'
 - ❖ Second wave feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir argued that gender was in fact socially constructed, thus driving a wedge between the notion of biological sex and gender.
- ❖ Anti-Gender Essentialism is thus the claim that neither women nor men have fixed, intrinsic, innate qualities *as women* or *as men*.

One Contention

- ❖ Some feminist theorists who are, like Lochlin, anti-essentialists, thus maintain that some other feminists theorists—again, whose general goals and orientations they largely share—unwittingly internalize the very presuppositions they are seeking to undermine.
- ❖ That is, by buying into gender essentialism, they reproduce the paradigm they should be seeking to undermine.
- ❖ Here the thought is, in part, that women are not ‘by nature’ or somehow ‘naturally’ prone to take up domestic crafts or arts traditionally associated with the role of women in a domestic economy.

Fibre Arts

- ❖ Mrinalini Mukherjee, Ritu Raja (1977)



Fibre Arts

Mrinalini Mukherjee, *Woman on a Swing* (1989)



A Rationalist Approach: Kantianism

- ❖ Judgments of beauty are utterly distinctive.
 - ❖ First: they are *judgments*, as opposed, for instance, feelings, or sensations (like pleasure), or emotional expressions.
 - ❖ Second: they are neither intellectual nor practical judgments.
 - ❖ From this it seems to follow that art cannot express or teach religious doctrine.
 - ❖ Nor can it instruct morally.
 - ❖ Art can have only 'purposefulness without purpose', to make vivid concepts 'sensible beyond the limits of experience.'
- ❖ Still, such judgements have content: they are not feelings.

One Feminist Critique

- ❖ The requirement of 'disinterestedness' in fact merely skews aesthetic theory towards an unreflective formalism, thereby distorting art's many other functions: education, worship, emancipation, cultural transmission, ethical value, including environmental values, and so on.
- ❖ Psychological distance is thus not a requisite for appreciating art; on the contrary, art appreciation and evaluation requires an enmeshed engagement with all aspects of production and transmission.