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Where is the Woman in Feminist Theory?
The Case of Aesthetics

Hilde Hein

Most people believe that feminism, and by association, feminist theory, is about the status and welfare of women. It certainly is true that feminists aim to achieve the equality of women and the end of patriarchal domination. However, I shall argue that feminism as a theory is a pattern of thinking that is not fundamentally about women, although it begins with a gendered perspective. It is, rather, an alternative way of theorizing about a host of topics that include, but are not limited to women. Feminists believe that the adoption of this way of thinking would advance the well-being of women among such other beneficent results as bringing about peace, respect for the environment, and the end of racial intolerance. Most feminists do have global goals such as these, and that alone should justify taking feminism seriously. In addition, there are intellectual features of feminism that speak directly to the interests of philosophers and scholars, and I will concentrate my remarks on these.

I will discuss the logic by which feminism redefines the very notion of theory, revealing it to be less a unifying device than a bedrock for difference; not as transcendent of experience, but as inextricably lodged within it. Feminist theory, according to this position, arises out of the plurality of practice and must be multiple because women and the realities of their experience are irreducible to any singular unit such as class, caste, nation or race. At the same time, women cannot be regarded purely as individuals, since their identity is denoted by each and all of the identifying categories that other theoretical systems have adopted as social, political and economic units of classification. Feminists believe there are excellent reasons in favor of redefining theory rather than repudiating plurality. They do not take the fact of plurality as grounds for nihilism or despair over the death of theoretical reason. On the contrary, openness to diversity appears to vitalize, not to hinder, theoretical discourse.

A model for the "thickened" view of theory that feminists advocate can be found in the realm of the aesthetic. Having survived a period of banishment as the stepchild of philosophy, where aesthetics was relegated to the non-essential and trivial, aesthetics seems now to have come into its own as addressing our central and most important cultural concerns. I will argue that there is a lesson for feminist theory in the development of aesthetic theory, which, like feminism, is motivated to discriminate and make diversity intelligible without reducing or destroying it. The success of feminist theory, like that of aesthetic theory, depends on its ability not simply to tolerate or reconcile differences—an aim that liberal democratic theories profess to embrace—but to welcome the novel and the unexpected and to rejoice in their multiplicity. In my view the pluralism and relativism that are distinctive of both feminism and aesthetics are not cynically adopted "postmodern" surrogates for certainty, but represent genuine alternatives to a totalizing theory which advances knowledge only at the
cost of diminishing what is knowable.

**Unifying Theory and the Diversity of Experience**

From the time of the Pre-Socratic philosophers to the present, men have sought to make reality intelligible. To do this they have tried to simplify the complexity of reality by subsuming it under a single explanation. Whether by invoking a single material substrate, a single organizing principle, a single mechanism of change, a single author, or at least a minimal combination of any of these, the aim has been consistently to reduce the chaos of experience to a simplified and manageable order. Periodically, fashions of simplification have changed, giving way to new patterns and archetypal structures, but vestiges of older systems tend to remain. The tendency to identify and reify the essences of things, for example, has been fairly constant with only minor shifts of emphasis. We no longer think of a Platonic Heaven inhabited by forms that are eternally fixed, nor even of a gradual fulfillment of an order preconceived in the mind of God; but we still frequently encounter representations of reality that attribute relatively stable "natures" to things in the world, some known and others yet to be revealed. Thus to affix a name to something amounts to celebrating an act of discovery. However the discoveries are rarely random. They come strategically dictated by theoretical schemata. Because investigators are familiar with that theoretical framework, they know where to look for discoveries and have a rough idea of what they can expect to find. Anomalous experiences are discounted as errors or dismissed as unreal until a new system is devised that makes room for them. In the Euro-centric modern world, the system of science is currently the prevalent strategy that controls experience and monitors what is legitimated as real or excluded as unreal. (The unreal may be acknowledged to exist in a dubious form - as private, or personal, or hallucinatory, but it does not enjoy the public respectability of the real.)

The theoretical matrix sternly limits what any individual may take to be her or his experience. The theory governs language and thought and, with them, the institutions of culture and society. Schools and madhouses, pubs and museums, legislatures and marketplaces, positively and negatively reinforce what people can express and how they can admit to feeling about it. While no society ostensibly professes to curtail human experience, most do restrict it even as they purport to extend and strengthen the community within which experience occurs and to educate the cohorts among whom it can be meaningfully shared. Those whose experience cannot be "contained" by the theory are labelled functionally impaired. Within the theoretical matrix, regardless of the world they have known, they lack experience - they are blind, deaf, culturally disadvantaged, handicapped, challenged, irrational, immature or underdeveloped - all forms of anaesthesia relative to the dominant paradigm and whatever they undergo does not count because it lies outside the system and cannot be categorized within it. Unity and simplicity thus exact a high price in casualties. Women and women's experience have typically been disqualified in this fashion. So, typically, have racial and ethnic minorities, children, old people, the mentally...
and physically disabled and others. The exclusion of these others, however, is rarely permanent or universal – children grow up, the elderly were once young, racial minorities are part of a bona fide majority somewhere. Only women are everywhere and irretrievably intermingled as individuals with those who fix their inferiority. Women are therefore uniquely placed and have a particular interest in redesigning theory.

Among the successive traditions of thought that have governed western culture, modern science is presumed to be an advance over the superstitions that it replaced. It purports to be less divisive and more universal in its application. The great liberating feature of Descartes’ model of reason, (which is echoed in the American Declaration of Independence) was its claim that all men equally possess the ability to reason. All men are allegedly endowed not only with equal rights, but with equal capacity to partake of the conceptual and material goods of the world. They have only to think in the right way and ask the right questions. The theory is provisionally equalizing, but it is not inclusive. It mandates the subordination of difference to sameness. Security is assured to those who subscribe to sameness. Strictly speaking one is not compelled to abandon uniqueness, but only to explain it away. Thus women’s femininity ostensibly justifies their exclusion. That may be overcome by a privileged few who are able to “transcend” gender. They can sacrifice uniqueness in exchange for the privilege of belonging. The existence of a few sterling examples of persons who “overcame their difference” effectively strengthens the theory by broadening its base and extending its outreach.

The exhortation by feminists that achievement of unity at any cost should not be the aim of theory and that theory ought not to diminish difference but to exult in it poses a radical challenge to the scientific tradition. It necessitates an altogether new understanding of theory, not just a successor that follows within the same metatheoretical paradigm as an outmoded theory. This reconceptualization is required, feminists claim, because the denial of difference that unification demands obscures experience and makes reality less rather than more intelligible. According to the feminist argument, the experience of difference cannot be subordinated to a universalized overdetermination. The view that I am considering affirms that women are multiply multiple – different from men, different from each other, and multiple even subjectively to themselves. There is no single explanation of woman as such, no answer to the proverbial “woman question,” for woman is positionally and contextually variable and contingent. As a result of this plurality, no reducing or unifying theory is applicable to women. Instead of repudiating theory altogether, however, and declaring women an unfathomable mystery, feminists affirm that theory must change. It must become fluid and multiple. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl describes a psychotherapeutic education of women as philosophers (i.e. as theorists) that will be the “unsilencing of suppressed voices” and will break up “inhibiting monistic formations”. Theory, she says, will be “a process, a constellation of ideas reconfigured and reconfiguring within a myriad of feminist practices.” Theory, so used, might amplify understanding without doing reductive violence to that which is understood.
Feminists are not even united in adhering to the pluralistic model that I have just introduced. Some prefer to retain a form of essentialism that replaces male supremacy with equality in difference or even with female supremacy. I believe that this approach perpetuates the traditional metatheoretical commitment to theory as simplification. It replaces complexity with unity (or in this instance with duality). In my view essentialism, whether feminist or masculinist, is intellectually indemonstrable and politically regressive. Since I wish to bolster the case for a pluralistic reconception of theory, I will not stray from my purpose here to consider the arguments for or against essentialism.

From Gender to Theory and from Theory to Gender

Reflecting upon gender led feminists to reassess the meaning of theory, and the resulting reflections upon theory produced new insights into gender. Simone de Beauvoir is undoubtedly the progenetrix of contemporary feminist theory, having said that “One is not born a woman; one becomes one,” and then shown how woman has been constructed as Man’s Other. Other theorists, following De Beauvoir’s lead have found that gender is a system of human relations that is deeply embedded in all other social relations. One is not a woman and in addition white, black, lesbian, heterosexual, Moslem, Jewish, Christian, rich, poor, urban, rural and so forth, but in gendered fashion some selection of all applicable descriptive attributes. Gender qualifies all that one is adverbially and not as a substrate. Woman’s identity is another way of being, differing from that of men, but also of other women.

The discovery of gender or rather of its social constitution means that there is no generic “man” that comes in two varieties, nor are there but two irreducibly different types of being, male and female, that acquire an overlay of culturally divergent accretions. Gender itself is a product of genderized thinking, originally from a masculine perspective. The idea of gender comes to us ready-made. Feminism reconstructs it from a feminine perspective and thereby reveals its gendered origin. In its political sense (the struggle for women’s equality) feminism precedes the reconstitution of gender, but as a gendered theory and a theory of gender that revolts against traditional theory, feminism coincides with the revelation that all theory is gendered.

Just as one becomes a woman (rather than being born one), so one becomes a feminist by declaration – not by birth or chance or out of habit. To adopt a feminist attitude is to take an avowedly gendered point of view that is contingently oppositional. It does not follow that if one does not make such a declaration one’s thinking is independent of gender. One of the great insights of feminism is the recognition that all thinking is gendered. In learning to think normally as children we assumed a gendered identity. Most of us, both male and female, learned to follow a standard paradigm that is gendered. We might call it “masculinist,” but it purports to be universal. It is so widespread that its point of departure is invisible. It is the “default model” that need not be identified or explained, and one does not assume or convert to it. But any alternative choice is oppositional. Feminism as a deliberately chosen thought-style is possible
historically only because gender is already constituted as dual. To switch modes—again whether one is male or female—is to take on an antipodal, that is feminine, point of view: and feminists do this by preference.

Feminist scholars in America began seriously exploring the social construction of gender in the 1970’s—at first angrily as if discovering a partner in flagrante, and then more coolly, observing it as a system of culture and of knowledge to be deconstructed." Some came to accept gender as an analytic category, a tool for understanding things (much as class and race have served before.) They recognized that the feminine had been defined as the deviant pole, which presupposes another pole from which it differs and which it does not (reciprocally) define. They discovered that the masculine pole, although it claims both logical and ontological priority, depends for its identity upon the negatively marked or gendered Other. The male gender is conceptually nonexistent, except in relation to its opposite, and this invisibility protectively disguises the male as the “human” norm from which gender is engendered. Upon realizing that “man” is not a neutral term, but an exclusive one, feminists initiated the now widespread campaign to replace “sexist” language with words that include the female in the human species and that do not degrade women to inferior status. But the rectification of language alone could neither correct the injuries done to women nor bring clarity to the confusion over gender.

Feminist theory does depend upon words, but it is born from and derives its vitality from feminist practice, and the credibility of its statements is tested in women’s experience. Characterized by a lack even of procedural specificity, it is a “musing on the circumference of experience.” This affinity for experience is a prima facie link between feminist theory and the aesthetic, which is inherently situational and grounded in experience that is immediate, multiple, and qualitatively diverse.

To do feminist theory we must return to the unoccluded study of lived experience, which has been overlaid by elaborate patterns of denial and mystification. Those patterns are part of the world to be unravelled. However imposed by conquest or domination, those patterns have shaped our reality. They have refined our perceptual capacities, and taught us to nurture values in secrecy, communicating in codes that remain unbroken by male dominated society. The world that women experience includes both less and more than the world that men typically describe. Women do not have the luxury of believing that our own experience is unique and universal and we cannot afford the arrogance of ignoring the experience of others. To undo the harm, both practical and theoretical, that such patriarchal simplification has done, women are compelled to study our own diversity. As Elizabeth Spelman points out, the reason that middle-class white women, who have done most of the talking, have had little to say about the variety of women’s experience is simply because they are ignorant of it. That ignorance must be corrected. “There are no short cuts through women’s lives,” she says, and if we are to theorize about women, we must know them in all their particularity. This is why the astonishing florescence of literature by and about women all over the world and the explosion of women’s visual, dramatic, musical, performance and other art expressions is of such great
importance and value to feminists. Only through these works can we begin to
know ourselves and one another and learn to benefit from our diversity. Feminist theory abides in these works.

The Place of Aesthetics in Feminist Theory and of Theory in Feminist Aesthetics

Traditional philosophical aesthetics has never successfully transcended the
paradox that it strives toward uniformity and universality while rooted in the
particular earthbound plurality of the senses. For all the idealism of its aspiration, aesthetic experience cannot be deduced from first principles. Aesthetic theory and criticism remain embedded in the manifold of phenomena. The honest aesthetician must always return to the sights and sounds and feelings from which not even a hidebound Platonist can be long distracted. Moreover aesthetic theory, if it is not moribund, must remain open to new technologies, new movements, new materials, new ways of experiencing and new ideas in the arts. In addition to the feuding partisans of successive theories and their opposing definitions of art, there are phalanxes of metatheoreticians who dispute the very possibility of defining art on the ground that it is inherently "open textured" and any purported definition is therefore to be suspected as a covert proposal for new critical canons.

Feminist theoreticians, like these aestheticians, deny that genuine feminist theory can arise de novo or out of abstract definition. It cannot have the axiomatic purity to which much of classical theorizing aspires. Since feminism presupposes the acknowledgment of gender as socially constituted, the theory that it articulates is inherently contextualized even as it struggles to overcome the situation that produces it. Encountered in a social context, feminism is often challenged, on the one hand, because it is ideological (or polemical) and, on other, as anti-theoretical. Aesthetic theory, likewise, balances between the vitality of new-made art which defies it and the authority of canonic judgment which trivializes it. New art risks non-comprehension or violence, while the reliably familiar reaffirms the reliably certain and same.

There are other possibilities. Feminists have learned to circumvent the exclusivity of theory as a by-product of masculine self-confinement, leaving women free to write, sing or paint themselves out of the world that men have constructed and into one of their own design. Men are not absent from that limbo-world, but they appear differently proportioned from the stature that they normally assign to themselves. Time and space are also altered, as are other categories of thought that have been reified, definitively it seemed, by the legions of male authors and artists who have dominated all modalities of representation and preempted our vision and thought. The reclamation of theory by feminists inseparable from our painstaking, but also raucous and jubilant reappropriation of experience.

This reappropriation turns out to be a revisioning and a renewal. A breakaway from the canonic "things as they are," it is an act of discovery. Especially as expressed by feminist artists, such discovery has provoked the criticism (from traditionalists) that feminist art is political and polemical, and
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therefore violates the prescriptive ideal that art be non-political and impersonal. Feminist artists, however, like all artists, draw the inspiration for their work from those features of the world that touch them most profoundly. Their art, therefore, does frequently depict aspects of male oppression as well as some of the banalities of femininity that elude men's consciousness (the fear and the reality of sexual assault, menstruation, childbirth, housework, unsentimentalized childcare, etc.) Feminist artists are uniquely affected by the clash between the canonic rituals that define the male-dominated artworld in which they are educated as artists and the world that they know as women who are routinely exploited by that artworld. It would indeed be remarkable if such incongruity did not manifest itself in their work, just as the cataclysmic personal and political confrontations of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation are evident in the art of the Baroque period.

In order to give voice to the unheard sound of this experience feminists sometimes produce works that are innovative in form and in their use of materials. Feminist exhibitions as a whole tend to be organized according to different structural priorities than traditional gallery shows (e.g. "Portrait of the Artist as Housewife," London, ICA, 1977; "The Dinner Party," Judy Chicago; "Post-Partum Document," Mary Kelly). They are meant to produce in the gallery-visitor an experience that is unlike and disruptive of the normal, spectator-to-object relation. To the degree that these qualitative differences depart by design from critical standards, feminist art subverts traditional values. Feminists mean to call those values into question, and in so doing feminist art blurs the distinctions between art and criticism, art and politics, and theory and practice. The message to be imparted is that the apparent neutrality of the artworld – its apoliticism and transcendence of partisan interests – is as much an obfuscation as is the corresponding pretense to the existence of a neutral, ungendered archetype of "man." The "masculinist" perspective turns out to be the "default model" of artistic expression, assumed automatically by practitioners as well as appreciators except where an oppositional stance is deliberately taken.

Feminist art and art criticism therefore do not pretend to neutrality, but declare themselves gendered and political. They affirm the watchword of feminist theory that the personal is and has always been political. Only the overt acknowledgment is new. Feminist aesthetic theory states its intention to intervene in a socially produced gender system. Art, art criticism, and aesthetic theory combine interactively, first to articulate that system and render it intelligible, second to expose it in qualitative detail, and thirdly to dismantle it.

By means of artistic expression and/or representation feminist art achieves aesthetically the realization that other feminist theorists strive to explain indirectly and abstractly. "Art does not just make ideology explicit but can be used, at a particular historic juncture, to rework it."22

Like most modern art, feminist art feeds upon the history of art, borrowing from, modifying, transforming and reversing traditional forms. But feminists are not merely competing to be innovative. They are struggling to say something that has not yet been said and whose expression requires the formulation of a radically new language. In forging the symbols of that language, they are
creating a new theory, scraped together with the help of the outworn tools of th culture that they aim to supersede. The theory is not independent of the expression, and the expression relies for its meaning upon the simultaneous emergence of theory. Traditionally these operations have been profoundly separate, successive and sometimes mutually antagonistic. Among feminists the have become simultaneous and mutually supportive.

I am arguing that feminists can take reinforcement even from conventional masculinist aesthetic theory in so far as it legitimizes the openness and interpretability of experience and promotes the peaceful coexistence of alternative reifications. Aesthetic theory does not forbid hanging a work by Picasso alongside one by Rembrandt and revering them both as great art rather than as competitive visions. The history of art is sometimes misrepresented as a progressive approximation to the truth. This is a pathological misjudgment derived from a view of science and social history that is only slightly less misplaced. By and large, however, aestheticians are not committed to the salvationist premise that ties success to the defeat of the dissimilar. (“We will bury you”. ) In the realm of the aesthetic we are not undone by multiple, equally viable interpretations of a single state of affairs or works of art. We are not compelled to make definitive or exclusive choices, and yet we are able to state reasons for preferring one choice above another and sometimes for rejecting alternatives that appear unworthy. In short, we are able to live civilly with a level of freedom and plurality in the aesthetic domain that appears to be unacceptable in civil society or in the market of ideas. Feminists question why this is the case, pointing also to such balmful synergism as arises from the multiple and various voices of a chamber orchestra. Far from producing conflict and disorder, their diversity produces a collective experience that is rich and vital for individual listeners and that enhances collegiality. In this respect too, therefore, feminists can look to the aesthetic for a positive model.

I am not proposing that aesthetic experience or the development of aesthetic theory (conventional or feminist) are sufficient as a basis of feminist theory, but do maintain that the first is necessary to and the second a valuable resource for its construction. I would like now to illustrate with some concrete examples how aesthetic and theoretical reflection do fertilize one another mutually, yielding understanding even of matters that are not overtly or exclusively related to women, feminism or aesthetics.

What Lessons for Theory Can be Drawn from Feminist Theory

Evelyn Fox Keller discusses an instance of theoretical reflection which infuses a feminist consciousness into a biological dispute that is not inherently or directly linked to issues relating to women. Keller describes the unique self-organizing behavior of the cellular slime mold, Dictyostelium discoideum. This organism, while in a single cell stage, reacts to starvation by a process of aggregation and differentiation. The prevalent explanation of its behavior was that a special founder or pacemaker cell predetermines and triggers the differentiation. Keller with Lee Segal (1970) suggested a locally initiated spontaneous organization that
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... did not presuppose the governing pacemaker. Their idea was given little credence in the biological community, leading Keller to ponder upon the similar disinclination on the part of that community to take seriously the non-hierarchi-
cal account of cellular process defended by Barbara McClintock. Keller went on
to write an intellectual biography of McClintock in which that biologist's
unorthodox manner of communing with organisms is discussed, along with her
now famous, but then unusual conclusions. Keller suggests that the predisposi-
tion among male scientists to favor single central governance explanations over
non-hierarchical ones affects not only their choice of explanatory models, but
also the analytic tools (mathematics) that they use to justify these. The non-
linear mathematical techniques that have been refined subsequently for
modelling steady-state and complex reaction-diffusion systems seem to bear out
that suggestion. Keller looks hopefully toward a science that will be receptive to
models of discourse sufficient unto the complexity of their task and therefore
both non-gendered and non-hegemonic.

Keller observes that it will not be easy to dislodge analyses that use the
military "command and control" imagery because that model has been so
indelibly etched into our conception of the universe – with its commander God.
All science seems to demand similar large- or small-scale impositions of author-
ity. The idea that a "simple accumulation of cells and the consequent local
exhaustion of food" would be the stimulus for a compensatory mechanism seems
downright anarchic and conventionally implausible. The metaphor is inappropri-
ate in a world dominated by male values, but it is not unlike women to come
together in little gossipy centers without visible leadership and get things done by
a kind of diffusion. Feminist science would support such feminine models,
probably with no more conscious awareness of their gendered perspective than is
now professed by (masculinist) science when it stands behind the "command and
control" metaphor.

The slime mold example illustrates how feminist consciousness, the assump-
tion of a gendered-feminine point of view, extends the range of plausible
interpretations of phenomena, and also reveals how the covertly gendered-
masculine point of view restricts the range of interpretations. Feminist
perspectives promise greater sophistication, more in keeping than simplifying
formulas with the complexity of the world we know.

Feminism is nothing if not complex. Myra Jehlen speaks of the "fruitful
complication" of feminist theory and welcomes contradiction not for its
irrationality, but in order to "tap its energy." Sandra Harding recommends that
we abandon the faith that coherent theory is desirable and instead declare our
fidelity to "parameters of dissonance within and between assumptions of patriar-
chal discourses," a route that will free the consciousness that is alienated,
bifurcated and oppositional and whose psychic, intellectual and political discom-
fort we should cherish. These authors convey a certain enthusiasm and delight
in the profusion of feminist theory. We must understand that this is not due to a
persistent pleasure in the obscure, but to an aesthetic rapport with a situation that
does not demand containment, but invites understanding. Gratification arises
too with release from theories meant more to subdue and confine than to
A second example of theoretical reflection that uses a feminine metaphor shows how an overtly acknowledged gendered-feminine perspective enlarges our understanding of a subject that, notwithstanding its inherently female reference, is typically associated with men. Susan Stanford Friedman examines the appropriation of the metaphor of childbirth to artistic creativity. As Friedman points out, the meaning of the metaphor is inevitably overdetermined by resonances of motherhood and the cultural significance of that institution. In Western patriarchal society it evokes the sexual division of labor and the correlative duality of mind and body. Women in that tradition are reduced to the material process of maternity which excludes them from the spiritual act of creative productivity. The use of the childbirth metaphor with reference to artistic creation therefore evokes a paradox. Implicitly, it contradicts the comparison that it calls to mind. Drawing upon reader response theory, Friedman shows how the reader's gender, but also that of the author, as well as the reader's expectation of the author's gender, affect the construction of the metaphor's significance.

Applied to a female artist, the metaphor takes on the meaning of slow and painful delivery, continuous involvement with the offspring, loving oversight, and protective concern. The woman's double-birthing capacity as woman and artist is evoked, sometimes as a conflict, but often as mutually intensifying. Directed at the male artist, the metaphor highlights the tension of overcoming natural impossibility. Childbirth here is a heroic act, sometimes involving the expulsion of a resistant object into the light of day.

The pervasive use of the childbirth metaphor (and such correlated images as conception, incubation, gestation, and parturition) to express male activity – even in blatantly anti-maternal contexts such as the production of the atomic bomb, raises questions as to the intention of the users. Friedman contends that for both biological and historical reasons, men and women bring different meanings to the metaphor. Men's use of it begins in distance from the Other and expresses ambivalence toward it – desire and rejection, reverence and fear, envy and hatred. Having given birth to the object, one has demonstrated power over it and has it, so to speak, under control. Men's image of childbirth is godlike and detached, though the appearance of the child is often associated with the mortality of its author and therefore engenders mixed emotion. Women are likely to employ the metaphor in a more intimately personal fashion. Some suggest the conflict of the woman who is an artist in contravention of social prescription. Others reflect upon the fragility of the offspring and the constancy of its need for care and nurturance. Still others express relief at the lifting of a burden carried alone, and anxiously assume a new burden of shared responsibility. Friedman anticipates that, with changing mores and the spread of feminist ideas, the profusion of meanings of the birth metaphor will increase, especially as women seize upon that image to celebrate their own self-creation. Friedman notes that some women internalize male ambivalence toward childbirth, expressing fear that genuine maternity will undermine their creativity.
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At the same time, other women wear their (pro)creativity proudly and defiantly, exulting in their animal vigor. Men do not face this duality, and their conception (sic) of the creative experience is essentially intellectual. Through her analysis of a variety of gendered differences in uses of the birth metaphor, Friedman reveals the male focus on exclusion and separation in contrast to women’s emphasis on collusion and union. Women’s exclusion from the creative process has effectively extended to denying them access to the metaphor of (pro)creativity as well. Apart from the irony of this prohibition, the silencing of women’s voices deprives not only women but the world, of rich insight into the complex process of creation. By contrast to the feminine deconstructions of the birth metaphor, those offered by men are formulaic, disingenuous and dull.

In this example, a gendered analysis of an apparently non-gendered phenomenon de-conceals the difference that gender makes. Retailed concrete experience in place of wholesale abstractions discloses aspects of mothering, fathering and parenthood that are normally suppressed by metaphors that replace and discount experience that is surely relevant. Gendered-feminine imagery awakens attention to phenomenal complexity and revives the stagnant intellect so that it may once again question the obvious and take note of the anomalous. We have been immunized against contradiction by the male-appropriated metaphor of childbirth. So deeply etched upon our consciousness is the myth that neutral creativity can bring forth monsters as word becomes deed, will becomes act, and the maker leaves his mark upon dumbly resistant matter that we forget the origin of this revolting parody. Friedman does not discuss the practical urgency of bringing feminist theory to bear on this state of affairs, and I cannot do more at this point than call it to the reader’s attention in the hope that the need will be clear. In that hope, I conclude instead with some remarks about the pleasures of theorizing.

The Aesthetics of Theory

Not everyone loves theory. Some of its opponents find it dry and dull, and others are offended by its cold calculation. Some feminists denounce theory as impractical and removed from reality while others object to its arrogant authoritarianism. Some accuse feminist theorists of capitulating to male ideology, of “selling out,” and suspect them of seeking male power. However, theory-making need not be assaultive or a rape. It can be festive and voluptuous, an act of love that heals and strengthens and is a source of pleasure. Feminist theory, unlike some feminist practice, is not destined to make itself superfluous. As a musing upon its own edges, it envisions a process of self-explication and understanding that is likely to remain with us.

Theory production is not usually described as aesthetic activity, but there are hints among contemporary apologists for theory who are sensitive to its aspect as self-contained entertainment. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, applauds Jacques Derrida’s examination of Kant’s Critique of Judgement, describing it as a “skewered” reading in which the treatise is treated as a work of art to be approached disinterestedly, for pure pleasure that is irreducible to pursuit of the
profit of distinction. By dramatizing or making a spectacle of the ‘act’ of stating
the philosophy the critique draws attention to itself as philosophical gesture.
However, Bourdieu goes on to note the serpent in Paradise: “Even in its purest
form, when it seems most free of ‘worldly’ interest, this game is always a ‘society’
game based... on a ‘freemasonry of customs and a heritage of traditions’.” In
other words, there are rules that delimit the sacred space and the players of
the game, and they are meant to be exclusive. Women “might as well have beards”
— they do not belong here.

Excluded by the rules, feminists have not given up on the pleasures of
theorizing however limited are the options available within the mainstream.
Women can join in the game as junior partners with patronizing approval from
the elect, or accept a designated position as outsiders. Feminists have rejected
both options. Instead, they are construing a theoretical discourse that draws
upon an alternative aesthetic. It does not resemble the heritage claimed by
conventional aestheticians, a yoking of Greek theory of Beauty and Poesis with
eighteenth century theory of taste. Instead it builds directly upon an aesthetic
experience that is not transcendent and does not exalt duality. It therefore
disregards many of the problems and puzzles of classical aesthetics. Feminists
are not much occupied, for example, with the relation of the autonomous artist (the
subject author) to the object that he wills into being. Genius is a male concept
that feminists find of little interest. They do not question the subject/creator’s
rationality or freedom, or the merits of (objective) representation over (subjective)
expression. Feminists do not endorse the dualisms of mind over matter,
determinism vs. freedom, intellect vs. feeling, subject vs. object, art vs. recreation,
work or other forms of doing. They take very seriously the domination of
one invented pole by another, and explore in art and its theory the multifarious
phenomenology of that relation. There is also among feminists a fascination with
the transformation of media, be it the woman herself, the language she employs,
or the pliant matter that she works. Feminists are not unconscious of the
traditional interests of aestheticians in defining art, its life and death, its judgment
and (proper) appreciation. Beauty and ugliness, form, expression and representation,
are topics that feminists address, but they are not feminist issues
and rarely arise as Problems within a feminist framework. No one pretends that
the conventional problems have been solved, but they have been superseded by
others of greater interest.

So far, feminist theory has been concerned chiefly with the deconstruction
and critique of phallocratic theory and practice. Feminist theory is invoked in a
piecemeal fashion, and only when the context of experience or discourse seems
to require it, often as a corrective to conventional exclusivity or generalization.
Feminist theory is still in its infancy, and feminist aesthetic theory has barely
seen the light. I am suggesting that aesthetic theorizing can provide a key to the
development of feminist theory for several reasons. (1) Because it necessarily
adheres to the minutiae of the immediate and the experiential, aesthetic theory
is genuinely pluralistic. It is bound to seek intelligibility among the anecdotal
iterations. It must be undaunted by complexity and undevastated by uncertainty.
Indeed it must greet these with joy. (2) Aesthetic theory must be open to

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innovation, since art is inherently expansive, ever appropriate of new materials, technologies, techniques and concepts. The multiplicity at its heart is not a mere contingency, but is its very meaning. As the source of life and the perpetuation of the species women, likewise, have a commitment to innovation and to a future that is open-ended. Submission to a fixed definition is not only violence to the spirit; it is its death. (3) Aesthetic theory has long played a peripheral part in the global schematism. Parasitic upon art, itself a commentator, aesthetic theory has been consigned to the sidelines of conventional theory, where it recapitulates the problems and paradoxes of metaphysics and epistemology. Feminist theory reverses that practice and gives the aesthetic pride of place. Renouncing universality and attending closely to the particular, feminist theory accentuates those events and circumstances that are divulged in aesthetic experience and works of art. Feminist theory reclaims that which traditional philosophy pronounces inessential, contingent and superfluous. This is the domain of the aesthetic, and feminist theory, by embracing it, can retain a perspective on value that is neither undermined by marginality nor in demand of sanctification. Feminist theory affirms pluralism without celebrating relativism and without despair.

Notes

1 John Hospers in Meaning and Truth in the Arts, 1946, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, distinguished between a “thin” formalist sense of the aesthetic and a “thick” contextualized sense. At that time the former was prevalent both in the arts and in philosophy of art. At the present time the fashion has turned toward the thick in both areas.


4 Darwin is alleged to have said that “discovery comes to the prepared mind.” The observation applies as aptly to aesthetic experience as to scientific inquiry. One does not hear symphonic form or chord sequences without knowing what to listen for, and one does not recognize poetic structures or iconographic references unless one knows what they are. These things are meaningful within the communities that have adopted them as aesthetic conventions and are often not apprehended at all by outsiders to those conventions. Ernst Gombrich defends this claim in Art and Illusion, 1960, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press. See also Joseph Margolis, Art and Philosophy 1980, Atlantic Heights, N.J., Humanities Press, on art as a “cultural emergent” and Arthur Danto, “The Artworld” Journal of Philosophy, 61, (1964) on art as governed by aesthetic conventions.

5 This does not mean that it cannot be enjoyed. It is noteworthy that even scientists with proper credentials take pleasure in publications such as The Journal of Irreproducible Results, Worlds in Collision, Broca’s Brain, and Fads and Fallacies which relate scientific hoaxes and para-scientific research.
Hilde Hein

The quest for counterexamples that can be accommodated reflects an article of faith in the ideology of scientific method. One's case is fortified by discovering and then repairing a weakness just as in the political arena the voice of the Loyal Opposition sounds a note of democratically respectable dissent. See John Stuart Mill, A System of Logic, London, Longmans (8th edition, 1961).


"The Education of Women as Philosophers" in Malson et al.


The "Woman-Question" was not invented by women, but by men. Women have not found themselves a mystery that needed explanation. But from the Fathers of the Church who wondered whether woman should have been produced at all (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Question XCII) to Lenin, who wondered what to do with them, and Freud who wondered what they want, men have pondered the mystery of women. Women have not shown the same interest in men. Apart from trying to understand their behavior, which often places women in great jeopardy, women have not been fascinated by masculine ontology.

For a brief and useful history of this succession, see Hester Eisenstein, Contemporary Feminist Theory, 1983, Boston, G.K. Hall.

As far back as the Pythagorean Table of Opposites there is an incongruity of logic and ontology in that the engendered has epistemic priority over the engendering principle. Thus darkness begat light, but is known only relative to it. Likewise, the infinite and the bounded, the female and the male – that which is born defines itself by opposition (and estrangement), but in naming itself, attributes derivative identity to that not-self (the matrix) from whence it came.

Jeffrey Allen and Iris Marion Young, eds. The Thinking Muse, 1989, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Even those classical theories of art and the aesthetic that are most monolithic and universalizing emphasize the diversity of qualities that must be encompassed by their unifying umbrella. Traditional aesthetics is replete with phrases such as "unity in diversity," "organic unity," "equilibrium of opposites" – which reflect the endeavor to come to terms with an inevitable plurality.

The decipherment of these codes has begun, too soon according to some critics, especially through the assistance of educated women who are capable of bridging the gulf between cultures and who have the patience and are willing to make the necessary translations. Examples of women who play this transitional part are Carol Gilligan, In Another Voice, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982, and Mary Belenky et al, Women's Way of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind, N.Y. Basic Books, 1986.


Morriss Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics”, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism vol 15, (1956) ; William Kentuck, “Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?”, Mind, vol. 67. 1958; Paul Ziff, “The Task of Defining a Work of Art”, Philosophical Review, vol. 62 (1953), and others observe that traditional theories of art such as the imitation, expression, formalist theories and their variants, though applicable in principle to the same works of art, were actually advanced by their promoters in order to justify new art forms. They concluded with the bankruptcy of all definitions of the general idea of art and turned unapologetically to the differences between artforms and among art objects.

Erik Erikson gave pride of place to space, absence and negativity in women’s experience because of an imagined analogy they bear to women’s anatomy. “The Inner and the Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood,” Daedalus, vol. 93, no. 2 (1964). A more plausible resonance for feminists is in the figurative hollow of woman as potentiator. As mothers, but also in many other private and professional capacities, women create the time, the space, and the limits in which men, other women and children grow, move, experiment and think. See Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Browney (eds.) Mothering the Mind, N.Y. Homes and Meier (1984). In the struggle for equality women often focus upon space as one of our greatest needs. viz. V. Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, N.Y. Harcourt, Brace and World (1929). See also “Womanhouse” by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, California Institute of the Arts, 1973. Space and time of our own are critical factors in all the centers for battered women, rape and incest victims, abortion referral, child care, health care and reading centers. Artists, novelists and poets celebrate their newly reclaimed sense of time and space, and these have even begun to make inroads among geographers, archaeologists, linguists and others.

Radical transformations in style mark artistic movements throughout history. Profoundly philosophical at their center, such developments in art as the rise of abstractionism, cubism, impressionism and varieties of analysis speak as much to epistemological change as to social crisis. Without insisting upon autobiographical detail, one may assume that sensitive and aware artists would be affected by the major perturbations in the Zeitgeist. That women and feminist artists should resonate with those social movements that affect them most closely should surprise us no more than that Goya was affected by the Spirit of the Enlightenment or that Giotto reflected controversial tendencies within Christianity.


Analytic aesthetics, even during the period of its greatest estrangement from professional philosophy, was preoccupied with the justification and the logic of critical judgment. However puzzling the possibility of standards might be, it was never seriously in doubt that some art is better than other art, that some interpretations are more plausible than others, that, in short, taste is dispensable and for legitimate reasons. What was clear was that these reasons did not hold as dictatorial a sway over action and opinion as the injunctions of law and ethics or the rationalizations of the system of truth.

It goes without saying that not all the preoccupations of conventional aesthetics are
of equal worth to feminists. Many remain within the standard hierarchical lexicon of philosophical rationalization of the masculinist worldview. Feminists have not been greatly concerned, for example, with distinguishing the "beautiful" from the "sublime" or with driving a wedge between "high" and "low" art or identifying art that is "popular," "decorative" or "secondary" in order to contrast it with "fine" art. Feminists have also avoided discussing aesthetic theories that defend the aesthetic experience as one that assumes "distance" or "disinterest". This is not because these problems have been solved, but because they do not merit solution.


26 A Feeling For the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock, 1983, San Francisco, Freeman Inc. McClintock was subsequently proven right and acclaimed by the community that had ostracized her. She won first the prestigious MacArthur "genius" grant, and then a Nobel Prize for her work in genetics.


10 It is possible that she is wrong about this. Perhaps the increased technologizing of the birth process and the compromises that women are making in order to achieve equality will lead to the masculinization of childbirth. This question is poignantly explored in novels such as Woman on the Edge of Time by Marge Piercy and The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood.

11 Unlike those followers of Wittgenstein who expected philosophy to shut itself out of business once its therapeutic job was done, feminist theorists fully anticipate that reality will keep gushing along, presenting new and unresolved questions for the pleasure of our understanding.