

WHY DOES FEMINISM MATTER TO AESTHETICS?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Peter Lamarque recently reported on current trends in aesthetics in the *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*.¹ Noticeably absent from his list, however, is the emergence and acceptance of feminist approaches in aesthetics, especially among analytic philosophers. Yet feminism is an important movement, one that should have been included among those he discusses. Indeed, my goal is to convince you that feminism should have made it onto Lamarque's list. Rather than criticize him, however, I want to use his oversight to ask why feminist philosophers working in analytic aesthetics have trouble getting the recognition they deserve. My suggestion will be that the specificity of feminist critiques in aesthetics is often what makes it difficult for philosophers to appreciate their significance.² I will also argue that it is precisely because of this specificity that feminism is a uniquely important movement in contemporary aesthetics.

¹ Lamarque, 'Reflections on Current Trends in Aesthetics,' *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 1, No. 1., April 2004.

² For now I would like to leave it somewhat ambiguous as to what I mean by 'the specificity of feminist critiques in aesthetics.' Later in this essay I will suggest, however, that a unifying thread in feminist writings in aesthetics is their effort to critique masculinist biases in the spheres of art and aesthetic experience. As such, these writings often have highly particular focuses; they attempt to document masculinist privilege in some particular artwork or in some particular cultural phenomenon.

2. IS FEMINISM A TREND IN AESTHETICS?³

Is feminism a trend in aesthetics? I believe it is. Feminist ideas are certainly not new to the art world; artists and critics such as Judy Chicago, Nancy Spero, Lucy Lippard, and Linda Nochlin have been reflecting on them since the rise of the women's art movement in the late sixties and early seventies. It has taken time, though, for philosophers to see themselves as having a role to play in clarifying and evaluating ideas advanced by feminists. For example, *Hypatia* and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, two leading English-language journals on, respectively, feminist philosophy and aesthetics, did not devote issues to feminist aesthetics until 1990.⁴ These collections sparked a flurry of publications in the 1990s by professional Anglophone philosophers on topics such as the exclusion of women artists from the canons of art history, representations of women in art, and the role of gender in relation to art and aesthetic experience.⁵ Recently, *Hypatia* devoted a second issue to feminist aesthetics, one that took stock of how feminist approaches had evolved in the decade since its original, landmark publication. So feminism seems to be both a recent and burgeoning trend in aesthetics.

Indeed, much of the evidence Lamarque cites in his essay supports this claim. For example, he notes that it is 'not fortuitous that in three of the recent collections on aesthetics, the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (2001), the *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (2003) and the *Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (2004) there are separate sections devoted to... individual arts.'⁶ This point can also be made of feminism. *The Oxford Handbook of*

³ It should be clear that I do not mean to suggest that feminism is faddish, or that it should not be taken seriously, in referring to it as a 'trend.' The term 'trend' sometimes carries negative associations. I use it to discuss feminism in this essay because Peter Lamarque uses it in 'Reflection on Current Trends in Aesthetics.'

⁴ See Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., *Hypatia, Special Issue: Feminism and Aesthetics*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring, 1990); *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Special Issue: Feminism and Traditional Aesthetics*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Autumn, 1990).

⁵ See Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds. *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993); Peg Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Korsmeyer, 'Perceptions, Pleasures, Arts: Considering Aesthetics,' *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*; Brand, ed., *Beauty Matters* (Bloomington, IN; 2000); Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁶ Lamarque, 'Reflections on Current Trends in Aesthetics,' *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 1, No. 1

Aesthetics and the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* both include essays on feminist aesthetics,⁷ and it has become standard practice to include entries on feminism and representative essays by feminists in aesthetics encyclopedias and introductory aesthetics anthologies. Thus the most recent edition of Oxford University Press's *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* includes entries on 'Feminism,' 'Feminism and Tradition,' 'Critiques of Feminist Aesthetics,' and 'Feminist Art History,' and each of the following anthologies include essays on feminism: Goldblatt's and Brown's *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts* (1997), Feagin's and Maynard's *Aesthetics* (1998), and Neil's and Ridley's *Arguing about Art* (2001).

It is also illuminating to contrast feminism with trends Lamarque depicts as topical. Lamarque remarks on the growing interest in aesthetics with individual art forms.⁸ I was reminded when I read him, however, of John Passmore's influential 1954 essay 'The Dreariness of Aesthetics.' One of Passmore's claims was that aesthetics had become an especially 'dreary' branch of philosophy because aestheticians were too preoccupied with sweeping definitions of art. He urged them instead to engage in 'an intensive study of the separate arts, carried out... [with] much respect for real differences between the works of art themselves.'⁹ Lamarque's remarks on the current interest in specific arts might be read as vindication at long last of Passmore's point. Yet recalling Passmore's essay leads me to wonder about the aptness of describing the current interest in individual arts as pioneering. If it was timely for him to advocate specificity in the fifties, how innovative can it be for us to heed that call today? This is not to deny that aestheticians have become more interested in specific art forms. My point is that the rise of feminism in aesthetics looks all the more innovative when you contrast it with this trend—when you notice that the first publications in this area by Anglophone philosophers were little more than ten years ago, whereas Passmore urged us to dispense with sweeping theories of art fifty years ago.

(April; 2004).

⁷ See, respectively, Mary Devereaux's 'Feminist Aesthetics,' *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, pp. 647 – 666, and Sarah Worth's 'Feminist Aesthetics,' *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, pp.437 – 446.

⁸ See Lamarque, 'Reflections on Current Trends,' *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, pp. 1-2.

⁹ Passmore, 'The Dreariness of Aesthetics,' *Mind*, Vol. 60, No. 239 (Jul., 1951), p. 335.

Now I want to be careful in challenging Lamarque. His survey is not intended to be exhaustive; he refers to it as a set of 'informal observations, neither comprehensive nor systematic,' that he offers based on his experiences as editor of *The British Journal of Aesthetics*. So my claim that feminism is a trend need not contradict him. He might also note that this trend simply is not reflected in submissions to *The British Journal of Aesthetics*. There may be differences between the British and American aesthetics communities, with feminism enjoying greater popularity in the United States. These strike me as legitimate replies. I find, though, that they deepen my puzzlement. Assume that feminism was not included in his survey because few articles have been submitted to *The British Journal of Aesthetics* that assess puzzles in aesthetics from a feminist perspective; this answer does not so much alleviate as exacerbate my concern. I began by wondering why feminism was not included in Lamarque's essay given that it has, I believe, as great a claim to be a trend as those he discusses. But if I am correct, why isn't this trend reflected in the submissions to *The British Journal of Aesthetics*? What makes it difficult for aestheticians *in general*, not just one prominent aesthetician, to recognize feminism as a legitimate trend?

A tempting answer comes to mind. Feminist writings are often animated by a special urgency. Consider what happens when a feminist notes how formalist theories of art lead us to overlook women's artistic achievements. Women often have been denied the same artistic training and opportunities as men, and the only avenue of artistic expression available to them often has been craft items, whose use-value makes it difficult to recognize them *as art* given a formalist theory. The feminist's point is not purely theoretical; she is not simply identifying a limit in one theory of art. She is counteracting a pernicious bias. Feminist writings often proceed, then, from the perspective that our habitual ways of talking about art are riddled with masculinist biases, and feminists are inclined to view failures to acknowledge the extent to which women have been excluded from the artworld not as innocent oversights but as manifestations of these biases. So the temptation for someone like myself, who sees feminism as a key movement in aesthetics, is to conjecture that the absence of any mention of feminism in Lamarque's essay is indicative of some larger masculinist bias at work in this essay.

Yet this criticism strikes me as unsatisfying. For one thing, it devolves too easily into *ad*

hominem. It is also unhelpful. Again, assume that there have not been many feminist submissions to *The British Journal of Aesthetics*. The provocative question this lack raises is *why* there have been so few. Why do feminists find it difficult to see their work as suitably 'philosophic' to submit it to this journal? In particular, is there something about contemporary analytic aesthetics that makes it difficult for feminists to see themselves as having insights to contribute to this area? Attributing the dearth of feminist submissions to some masculinist bias in its editorial practices dodges this question.

3. RETHINKING BEAUTIFICATION: ANN CAHILL ON DRESSING UP

I have a theory about this issue, but it will be helpful to first focus on an example to illustrate it.

Let me focus on a recent essay by Ann Cahill entitled 'Feminist Pleasure and Feminine Beautification.' I choose this essay for two reasons. First, Cahill's essay is a nice example of the work currently being done in feminist aesthetics.¹⁰ Second, we would not be surprised, I think, to find her essay in an analytically oriented journal like *The British Journal of Aesthetics* or *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*.¹¹ She presents what she calls a 'phenomenological analysis of a particular process of beautification.'¹² Yet her method is more autobiographic than phenomenological. She reflects on what it was like to dress up for a

¹⁰ Cahill's essay was recently published in a special issue of *Hypatia* (2003, Vol. 18, No. 4: 42-64) on feminist aesthetics, the aim of which was to assess how feminist approaches had evolved since the landmark 1990 issue of *Hypatia* on this topic. Her essay is one of many essays in this volume to reappraise ideas put forward by previous feminist aestheticians.

¹¹ Professor Cahill might not agree with this assessment of her essay. She is one of the editors of the *Continental Feminism Reader* (Lanham, Maryland; Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), and she might dispute my characterization of her essay as analytic. I do not want to overstate my point. My claim is simply that it is reasonable to think that her essay could be found in a more analytically-oriented aesthetics journal like *The British Journal of Aesthetics*. I draw this conclusion for several reasons. First, her essay does not make heavy use of technical terminology popular in contemporary continental philosophy. She makes passing reference to Heidegger, but she does rely on more recent continental philosophers or continental feminists. Finally, as I note above, her essay is not so much phenomenological, as she suggests, as autobiographic. So while I can imagine a case being made for thinking of her essay as an example of continental philosophy, it strikes me as reasonable that it could pass for analytic. I hasten to add that no value judgment is intended in noting this distinction.

¹² Cahill, 'Feminine Pleasure and Feminine Beautification,' *Hypatia*, p. 43.

sister's wedding. But it is not unheard of for analytic aestheticians to employ autobiography.¹³ So her essay is both a nice example of contemporary feminist aesthetics and an essay we should not be surprised to find in an analytically-oriented aesthetics journal. One way to pose my question, then, would be to ask whether there is, nevertheless, anything in her essay that might make it challenging for an analytic philosopher to accept it as philosophic. Knowing that we should accept it as philosophic, is there anything that might make it difficult to appreciate it as such?

Let me say more about Cahill's argument. Her goal is to develop a subtler analysis of beautification than those proposed by other feminists. Many feminists deplore the role beauty plays in women's lives. Beautification practices are, they argue, cruel and oppressive, for they inevitably require women to capitulate to male ideals of beauty, and the considerable role they play in women's lives speaks to the thoroughness of women's subjugation to these standards. Cahill's aim is to chart a more moderate position—one that neither uncritically denounces nor uncritically accepts feminine beautification. Toward this goal, she reflects on the experience of getting dressed up for a sister's wedding. Her essay is rich, and I cannot do justice to the many points she makes, but let me mention a few key theses.

One of her key insights is that the rituals women perform in preparing for special occasions, such as weddings, differ from everyday beautification. Most feminists to have written on this topic have focused on the dietary and cosmetic practices women perform on a daily bases. A woman's focus in these cases, however, Cahill suggests, is not so much *beauty* as complying with a 'cultural necessity.'¹⁴ By contrast, women seem to directly reflect on their appearance as an aesthetic project when they undertake the extensive task of, say, getting dressed up for a wedding or a prom. The routines they perform in preparing for such 'special occasions' seem to constitute a clearer indicator, therefore, of the role beauty plays in their lives.

Cahill makes several provocative points based on this insight. For example, she notes that

¹³ See for example Peter Kivy's 'Jokes are a Laughing Matter,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 61:1, Winter; 2003. Kivy ends his essay by recalling what it was like as a young philosopher to attend meetings of the American Philosophical Association and felt alienated by the jokes told at them.

¹⁴ Cahill, 'Feminist Pleasure and Feminine Beautification,' *Hypatia*, p. 44.

the decision to adopt an aesthetic standpoint toward oneself is more deliberate than many feminists have assumed. Getting 'dressed up' is a luxury one permits oneself on rare occasions. Far from mechanically capitulating to masculine expectations about appearance, getting dressed up involves a deliberate suspension of everyday cultural expectations about appearance in which one adopts something more like a disinterested, purely aesthetic standpoint toward one's appearance. Cahill also notes that women typically engage in beautification practices apart from men, in the company of other women. Getting dressed up for a wedding or prom is collaborative enterprise, with women helping each other dress up, alternatively shifting between being co-audiences and co-creators of their appearances as artistic projects. Thus feminist dismissals of beauty seem too crude. Far from requiring women to mechanically surrender to a male audience's expectations, beautification in its purest cases involves a voluntary decision to take up a disinterested standpoint toward oneself and to share this standpoint with other women whom one regards as co-authors of one's appearance as an artistic project.

4. WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO GREAT WOMEN AESTHETICIANS?¹⁵

More could be said about Cahill's essay. My interest, though, is not her essay's details but what it reveals about why it is difficult to see oneself as a feminist and a philosopher. I suggested that her essay is a good example of the work being done in feminist aesthetics and that we should not be surprised to find it in an analytically-oriented journal like *The British Journal of Aesthetics*. If I am right, what does her essay reveal about why it is nonetheless difficult to think of oneself as a feminist aesthetician?

My hunch is that some philosophers would see her essay as too anecdotal. Her claims about beauty rely on her analysis of her sisters' experiences as they prepared for their wedding. Yet

¹⁵ The title of this subsection is a pun on art historian Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking 1971 essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' Nochlin argued, among other things, that the traditional idea of fine art had led art historians to overlook the artistic accomplishment of women. Similarly, my claim in this section is not that there have not been any important figures in feminist aesthetics but that there is a bias in our traditional idea of aesthetics, our expectations about what it means to work in this area, that keeps us from recognizing feminists as legitimate philosophers of art.

counterexamples come to mind for them. For example, why assume that dressing up necessarily involves a voluntary break with everyday cultural expectations about appearance? Why not view it as an *involuntary intensification* of these expectations? Cahill makes it sound as if her sisters were engaged in a kind of Kantian free play of imagination while they dressed up, but presumably it would not have been okay to paint their faces teal in the name of disinterested aesthetic self-contemplation. So why not interpret dressing up as *amplification* of already demanding strictures about appearance? And why conclude from the fact that women dress up together that a uniquely feminist community is thereby created? Women's fashion magazines contain few pictures of men; here too, then, we have a community focused on feminine beauty that is comprised almost entirely of women. Yet why not interpret the fact that women comprise the bulk of these magazines' readerships as evidence of the prevalence of the 'male gaze'? Why not see it as regrettable that women should be presented as objects of beauty in *both* men's and women's magazines?

Now let me be clear: my aim is not to fault Cahill.¹⁶ My point is that some philosophers might dismiss her essay because it is so focused on *one specific event*. Her claims about beatification may be true to what she and her sisters felt as they prepared for their wedding, but counterexamples come to mind for her claims, and some will conclude, I submit, that she is not really doing philosophy so much as a kind of autobiography or ethnography. Indeed, she herself sometimes voices this worry:

As I examine one particular experience of communal feminine beautifying for its meaning for feminine subjectivity, my analysis is of course limited by the particularity of that experience. Indeed, the women who will provide the material for my analysis speak and act from a highly particularized location, one marked, among other factors, their race (white), class status (upper), education (advanced), and familial size and structure (large and traditionally nuclear).¹⁷

Cahill here acknowledges the diversity of experiences that women can have with respect to

¹⁶ Indeed, she offers a plausible counterargument to my second criticism. See Cahill, 'Feminist Pleasure and Feminine Beautification,' *Hypatia*, p. 60, for her remarks on the tendency among feminists to exaggerate the authority and prevalence of the so-called 'male gaze.'

¹⁷ Cahill, 'Feminist Pleasure and Feminine Beautification,' *Hypatia*, p. 44.

beauty based on factors such as race and class. But a philosopher of a different stripe might read this passage as evidence that her essay is too 'particularized' to have conclusions of broad philosophic import. Her essay may be interesting for what it says about how women of a particular racial and economic group feel about dressing up, but we cannot draw any general conclusions based on her reflections, unlike, say, a more abstract essay on the ontology of beautification.

I focus on Cahill's essay, but my sense is that such specificity is common in feminist aesthetics. Six of the ten scholarly essays¹⁸ published in *Hypatia's* recent issue on feminist aesthetics focus on specific artists (Jenny Saville, Titian, Virginia Woolf), specific groups of artists (Catholic women artists), or specific cultural phenomena (dressing up for weddings, Venus and Serena Williams's tennis outfits). A similar pattern can be found in Hein's and Korsmeyer's *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, which was based on the landmark 1990 issue of *Hypatia* on feminist aesthetics. Several of this collection's essays focus on specific artists (Georgia Okeefe), groups of artists (contemporary black women novelists), or specific cultural artefacts and phenomena (depictions of feminists in suffragist cartoons). A noteworthy feature of feminist aesthetics, then, is its specificity. Feminist aesthetics is perhaps best defined, as Mary Devereaux notes, as a 'diverse family of theories, approaches, and models of criticism united by their resistance to "male" privilege and domination in the sphere of art and aesthetic experience.'¹⁹ One of the main ways feminists resist male privilege, in turn, is by critiquing specific artworks and cultural trends. To be a feminist is, we might say, to be committed to weeding out masculinist biases, and to accomplish this task a feminist typically needs to document their presence in specific artworks or cultural phenomena.

So my suggestion is that philosophers have difficulty appreciating feminist aesthetics *as philosophy* because of its specificity. But if I am correct, then we have all the more reason to respect it as a trend in aesthetics. One of Lamarque's provocative claims is that the current

¹⁸ I do not include Patricia Locke's poem, Joanna Frueh's commentary on her performance art, my annotated bibliography, or Estella Lauter's and Flo Leibowitz's book reviews in this list. I hasten to add that no value judgment is intended in separating out these texts as 'non-scholarly.'

¹⁹ I borrow this definition from Mary Devereaux. See Devereaux, 'Feminist Aesthetics,' *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, p. 647.

interest in individual arts may lead to a crisis in aesthetics:

[T]he worry is that aesthetics then loses that great aspiration of philosophy, however derided, to be universal and timeless... In other words, the more abstract the subject matter the more universal are the findings likely to be; an analysis of truth or meaning or ontology or symbolism or fictionality is inherently less likely to be culture bound than discussions of impressionist painting, avant garde film or the realist novel.... [L]et me describe the tension like this. The more abstract the subject matter of aesthetics... the more respect aesthetics is likely to gain in the broader philosophical community.... However, aesthetics of this kind wins this respectability at a price, for it loses much of its distinctness... and is in danger too of losing touch with the art forms it purports to analyse and the practitioners of these forms.²⁰

Aesthetics has always been a misfit branch of philosophy, often seeming too close to art criticism for philosophers in more abstract areas, like metaphysics and epistemology, to take seriously. The growing interest in individual arts does not bode well, in turn, for our efforts to win philosophic respectability. We aestheticians had a hard enough time winning respect when we were obsessed with identifying necessary and sufficient conditions for an object's qualifying as art; it will be all the more difficult now that we have abandoned this project in focused meditations on impressionist painting, avant garde film, and realist novels.

But in that case feminism's struggle to win recognition in aesthetics mirrors the problem aesthetics faces with respect to philosophy in general. Just as aestheticians struggle to convince philosophers their work has broad implications for other areas of philosophy, so too feminists have struggled to convince aestheticians their work has broad implications for aesthetics. If this comparison is fair, then feminists may have insights to offer aestheticians. If Lamarque is correct, aesthetics now faces a crisis with respect to the relationship between the particular and the universal. On the one hand, what distinguishes aesthetics, what keeps it, in Passmore's words, from being dreary, is its specificity, its ability to impart the thrill that comes from appreciating a great book, painting, or piece of music. On the other hand, the more aesthetics contents itself with this particularity the less it seems like philosophy. So the challenge is to explicate this gap between the particular and the universal—to show how conclusions of broad import flow out of careful analyses of specific artworks or aesthetic experiences. But feminists

²⁰ Lamarque, 'Reflections on Current Trends,' *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, p. 2.

have laboured with this dilemma, I suggest, since they first began to publish in aesthetics.

Indeed, I find it helpful to close by juxtaposing my quotation from Peter Lamarque with an observation Hilde Hein made in one of the first publications in feminist aesthetics:

I shall argue that because aesthetics has never entirely betrayed or abandoned its openness to all kinds and grades of experiences, it remains... a model for feminist theorizing. Aesthetic theory has always appreciated the unique and singular individual – even while yearning for the universal.²¹

When Hein wrote these words in 1993 feminists were increasingly coming to conclude that there was no such thing as a single feminine nature. Hein saw value in such postmodern critiques of essentialism but worried about their relativism. Aesthetics, she hoped, might offer an alternative. The challenge feminists faced was to respect the full diversity of women's life experiences while identifying conclusions of broad significance to feminists trying to oppose masculinist biases. Yet something like this challenge sits at the heart of aesthetics, for aestheticians have always sought to elaborate general claims about art based on their firsthand experience of particular artworks. So Hein's hope was that aesthetics might serve as a model for how to theorize about the particular without sacrificing the ambition for the universal. The situation may now be reversed. If Lamarque is correct, the challenge aestheticians face is to show how claims of broad import flow out of careful analyses of specific artworks. But it is precisely because feminists have grappled with this dilemma since they began to publish in aesthetics that their work should matter to aesthetics.

²¹ Hein, 'Refining Feminist Theory: Lessons from Aesthetics,' *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective* (Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 4 – 5.