

# Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?

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## Old and new appraisals of women's artistic production

The time has come for a campaign against all the weeping and wailing. Even the media have got the hang of it—with their usual inconsequence. Women are oppressed, exploited, degraded. . . . Although this state of affairs has hardly changed since it was first articulated, to continue to proclaim it now in the artistic realm seems almost pointless. But this need not necessarily be the case. As can be seen on closer examination, it is the tone of the lament that makes it seem inadequate. The form the lament takes still acknowledges its addressee. Traditionally it was women—professional mourners—who rendered grief public, be it in regard to death, to suffering or to the victims of massacres; this was one of their rare opportunities to assume a public function. But precisely for this reason it was not at all startling, indeed, no one particularly noticed, when women began publicizing and decrying their own lot, that of their sisters, their female ancestors and, should women's fate not improve, the lot of future women. Clearly, Cassandra was not a false prophet. She was simply not heard. No one paid attention to her.

For this reason I thought it tedious to enumerate once again the entire battery of obstacles constructed to frighten off and exclude women from the artistic realm. Yet the handicaps and the absences are also part of women's history, and perhaps even the greater part, since women did not clomp through history in combat boots, and their traces are fleeting and obscured. To be sure, we do not complain as much today because we have a movement making demands that will change the future. Nevertheless, in respect to the question of a "feminine aesthetic," we need to re-examine its traditional assessments once again, if only for the reason that we lack a viable conceptual basis to work from.

Repeatedly and rightfully women have bemoaned the "deformations of even their own cultural taste": "I would . . . far sooner have been caught dead with Hemingway than with Virginia Woolf in my hands,"<sup>1</sup> says Shulamith Firestone about her development. The pursuit of art, often based on the search for a realm of sensitivity in hopes of thereby escaping the confines of the home, may become a trap for women just as easily as other pursuits. When discussing that which we associate with patriarchal structures in the cultural realm, we immediately take note of a scandalous situation which, along with many others, was uncovered long ago but still prevails. Just to refresh our memory, Simone de Beauvoir established long ago that men mistake their descriptive perspective for absolute truth. The scandalous situation, then, is: the equation of truth with the masculine perspective, that is, with everything observed, examined and portrayed from a male point of view, which we were made to adopt very early in life. This false equation not only predominated in the production and reception of art. It also guaranteed that, despite our fervent endeavor, this sphere remained external, foreign and remote. This was but one reason for our exclusion among the many overt and lucid strategies employed by men to repress us when they found that our perceptive powers had not been sufficiently blunted.

George Sand, *Histoire de ma Vie:*<sup>2</sup>

*Mr. de Keraty followed me into the anteroom in order to debate with me, at yet greater length, his theory concerning the intellectual inferiority of women. It would be impossible for even the most intelligent woman to write a good work. And as I wanted to leave then, he ended his speech with a Napoleonic stroke, which was to shatter me. "Believe me," he said in a weighty tone, as I was about to open the last door of his sanctuary, "bring children into the world instead of*

*books!" "My dear," I answered, thinking I would choke on my laughter and slamming the door shut in his face, "follow your advice yourself, as well as you can!"*

The classic notions about women's artistic competence are all too familiar. Though she is the great theme of art, woman as empirical being is acceptable only by virtue of her supposed inspirational powers. "In an Amazon society there could be neither culture nor history nor art, since art is not essential to woman."<sup>3</sup> We know today, though only because we bothered to look into the matter ourselves, that it is not difficult to prove that such statements are historically incorrect. They show (and help justify) that the masculine realm of artistic production, and often the artistic products themselves, are not only inaccessible to women, but are also fundamentally foreign to us.

Critics have always regarded the female producers of literature, art and music, few and far between as they are, as exotic aberrations. From a purely quantitative point of view, this indeed was and still is the case, although we have yet to rediscover the many women artists who were consciously forgotten.

To be sure, women's representation in the arts is a rarity. And even this rarity is always measured in terms of production norms within the established framework defining the division of artistic labor, a framework which does not encompass forms of social creativity. And when a few works do manage to find their way to the public despite all obstacles placed in their path, they tend to be viewed in the following manner: Though women may have accomplished some rather nice and enjoyable things now and then, all the major innovative achievements have nonetheless remained the exclusive territory of the great masters of the pen, the brush or the keyboard. (Thus any mounting anxiety can be quickly and easily quelled.)

But now there is a threat from the other front: the theoretician of equality. Today the line of argument emphasizing equality belongs to the repertoire of the man who moves in "progressive" circles. He says that since they can no longer be kept completely ignorant, women should at least turn out to be what men already are. One need only open the floodgates, and women will stream into the spheres dominated by men. But what if we no longer view the difference as deficiency, loss, self-effacement and deprivation, but rather as opportunity? Around the turn of the century, the statement "We women can do just as much as men" served as a beckoning light. Today it is no longer so terribly impressive. Of course we could do just as much. The question is, do we want to do just as much as men, or the same thing as men? Here we have come full circle. So it would seem.

Chantal Akerman, Interview in *Frauen und Film (Women and Film)*.<sup>4</sup>

*If women imitate men's battles they will become weaker and weaker. They must find new forms of struggle. This became evident in Hendaye where women demonstrated against the death sentence in Spain. Some women shouted and clenched their fists, while others just hummed. They went "mmmm-mmm" with their lips pressed together, and moved forward in a row. That is a new way of demonstrating which can be a hundred times stronger than fists. We have had a virtual inflation of shouting with raised fists, and I, for one, simply walk by when I hear it. In film and in the arts we must also find a language which is appropriate to us, one which is neither black nor white.*

Art has been primarily produced by men. Men have dominated the neatly segregated public sector that controls it, and men have defined the normative standards for evaluation. Moreover, insofar as they came into contact with this sector at all, women have for the most part acquiesced to its value system. These realizations led Firestone to the conclusion that "It would take a denial of all cultural tradition for women to produce even a true 'female' art."<sup>5</sup> Such a statement is easily made. Indeed, aesthetic norms and cultural standards have meaning only in their sublation. But those standards and those norms were not even our own. What is the ground that we are working? From where does a "feminine" art get its identity? Or does it not need to do that? Is art, then, still art

in the traditional sense, no matter how far it has gone to the dogs? Is "feminine" a criterion of substance, an ontological entity?

Let us then radically negate all the masculine cultural achievements and begin anew at the point where we once left off, tilling the soil as our female ancestors did before the great male putsch. That is not very funny, even as a powder room joke. Perhaps we would enjoy that—linking ourselves directly to bygone power, but we should be wary of construing a direct connection where none exists. Making such a connection can raise false hopes of finding help.

Call as often as we might to the old mother goddesses—Aphrodite, Demeter, Diana and all the rest of those Amazons of long lost female empires—their power cannot reach this far, for their empires have been extinguished. Only the important consciousness that things were once different eases our burden a bit. To be sure, it is very important that we reappropriate moments of female potential from past cultures which have been silenced in organized fashion by male history. And the work to be done in this area is immense. (I emphasize this to avoid any misunderstanding.) But any attempt to link them directly to our experiences in the twentieth century will be unsuccessful. And if we nonetheless force a direct connection, the results will be downright pitiful. We will be left with parsley as a method of inducing abortion, and here and there a herbal home remedy.

The desire to tailor a positive (female) counterpart to the world that was constructed and interpreted by men is not satisfied in this manner. Let us rather quote the women of the past as we wish, without being pressured into retroactively fabricating continuity. On the other hand, though, a historical archeology in search of women past and forgotten, their obscured activities, living conditions and forms of resistance, is not just nostalgia. The hidden story of women, which reveals itself to us as primarily one of suffering and subjugation (now *here* is continuity!), is the dark side of cultural history—or better: the dark side of its idealized version.

Women artists waft through history as mere shadows, separated from each other. Since their deeds remained for the most part without effect and their creations were, with rare exception, absorbed into the masculine tradition, it is not possible to retrospectively construct an independent countertradition. Only female martyrs are not in short supply. All of this would certainly seem to be grounds enough for avoiding even the most trifling involvement with the problems of art and cultural history.

But the Great Refusal is not the solution either. To believe that feminine spontaneity need be creative in every case is to fail to recognize the powerful effect that cultural and historical deformation also had on the subjectivity of women, as mentioned by Firestone. Can women just "be women," reduced to some elemental Being? We are in a terrible bind. How do we speak? In what categories do we think? Is even logic a bit of virile trickery? Or to put it even more heretically, how do we feel? Are our desires and notions of happiness so far removed from cultural traditions and models? Feminism cannot ultimately imply that we are to stop thinking, feeling, longing. No one ever claimed that. On the contrary, we are consciously just beginning to do these things. No doubt, we have always done these things differently than men. (We are dealing with a sort of double exposure here.) But the means of expression most readily available to us for communicating our perceptions, our thought processes—language, forms, images—are for the most part not originally our own, not of our own choosing. Here we are still at the beginning. Sensitivity to the patriarchal structures common to language usage<sup>6</sup> is certainly a step in this direction.

#### **Lucy Lippard: "Why a separate women's art?"<sup>7</sup>**

*What seems to be most important in this whole matter is that we focus our eyes and our feelings upon the flashes of insight which our feminine sensitivity affords us.*

#### **Frieda Grafe, in Filmkritik:<sup>8</sup>**

*Language, the medium of my work, is for me already so generalized and mute that I cannot strive for even further generalities. Instead, I direct all my energies toward making the wall of generalities so thin that something will be able to*

*break through the barrier, something can come from within my body and enter the overarticulated linguistic sphere. I want to show the generative base of language before it atrophies in communicable form.*

We ought to rid ourselves of the notion of a historically ever-present female counterculture. And yet, on the other hand, the very different way in which women experience things, their very different experiences themselves, enable us to anticipate different imaginations and means of expression.

No matter which tack I take, I am left with the frustrations and difficulties inherent in positive definitions.

#### **The pre-aesthetic realms**

Even in the past, I contend, the exclusion of women from the artistic realm could not extinguish all their aesthetic needs. These creative impulses, however, were shunted off into the "pre-aesthetic" realms, where they evaporated under the strain of women's daily routine. Women furnished the living quarters, set the tables, arranged, decorated and adorned their clothing and above all themselves.

That was allowed, as long as it was being done to please the man. These activities quickly corrupted women. They set the table for the man, they dressed and adorned themselves for the man—not for themselves or for each other, but rather in competition with each other. They busied themselves weaving and knitting, but such functional artworks, handicrafts and decorations have always been considered inferior, commonplace. This verdict is of course not entirely unfair, especially in those cases where even these most timid efforts were channeled into subservient obsequiousness and excessive affection-seeking.

#### **Sylvia Plath, in *The Bell Jar:*<sup>9</sup>**

*Once when I visited Buddy I found Mrs. Willard braiding a rug out of strips of wool from Mr. Willard's old suits. She'd spent a week on that rug, and I had admired the tweedy browns and greens and blues patterning the braid, but after Mrs. Willard was through, instead of hanging the rug on the wall the way I would have done, she put it down in place of her kitchen mat, and in a few days it was soiled and dull and indistinguishable from any mat you could buy for under a dollar in the Five and Ten.*

Here the ambivalence once again: on the one hand we see aesthetic activity deformed, atrophied, but on the other we find, even within this restricted scope, socially creative impulses which, however, have no outlet for aesthetic development, no opportunities for growth.

It is true that these activities never had to become static, unchanging artistic norms. They never became obsolete products; they remained bound to everyday life, feeble attempts to make this sphere more aesthetically pleasing. But the price for this was narrowmindedness. The object could never leave the realm in which it came into being, it remained tied to the household, it could never break loose and initiate communication.

But what would happen if someday we cleared out this realm and opened it only to ourselves and other women? What if we alternated painting our faces with painting on canvas? What if we turned recipes into poetry? What if all these activities were to shed their utilitarian rationale of male approval?

#### **Ann Anders: "On Unravelling and Reknitting a Sweater":**

*The old one was the first self-made*

*Grown too large.*

*The wound up time of urgent experience*

*Still fills it out.*

*Weeks of work and sensuality*

*Not divided into days and nights*

*Alone or entwined with many others.*

*The increase and decrease of tension*

*Attests to density in memory.*

*Fetched forth again the largeness appears,  
tucks bear witness: from the beginning.  
Grown thinner, experience more fragmented  
The smooth stitches turn into difficult cable,  
Growing upward, lending strength.  
Though I knitted narrow strips of blue into the grey,  
There was hardly enough wool.*  
[3/9/76]

Perhaps that is all too simple, too superficial. Attempting to knit the gap between the artistic realm and social reality is problematic in that this gap is not simply the result of foolish blunder, but is rather the result of particular preconditions.

Women succeeded in entering the artistic realm when they gained access to it via the adjoining "pre-aesthetic" realms. In the eighteenth century women were able to enter the realm of literature by means of letters (the epistolary novel), since this was an age in which letters and novels were gaining dignity and the dissolution of rigid formal rules allowed greater flexibility. Experience could be gained in writing private letters. Since letters and diaries have no clearly defined literary niche, it was all right for women to practice on them. Only the Romantics considered conversation—another feminine domain in literature—to be aesthetic activity. Men were amazed by the new tenor, the new tone, the irreverence and more sensual descriptions unique to women's letters, and on occasion they even showed open admiration. It did not take long for this medium to be included in the literary canon.

But it is difficult to merely reach back and link up to these "feminine" media—letters, weaving. It is, in fact, almost more difficult to do this than to work with the "unfeminine" technical media such as film, since these need not contend with being traditionally relegated to the domain of the housewife. We should not foster the false assumptions that our sewing teachers indeed pointed us in the right direction. There is no direct path from the decorative potholder to the tapestries of Abakanovicz. Besides, I am still horrified by the whole ruffles-and-sewing basket business we were subjected to as young girls.

I believe that feminine artistic production takes place by means of a complicated process involving conquering and reclaiming, appropriating and formulating, as well as forgetting and subverting. In the works of those female artists who are concerned with the women's movement, one finds artistic tradition as well as the break with it. It is good—in two respects—that no formal criteria for "feminist art" can be definitively laid down. It enables us to reject categorically the notion of artistic norms, and it prevents renewal of the calcified aesthetics debate, this time under the guise of the feminist "approach."

If, however, women have different assumptions with regard to their sensory approach, their relationship to matter and material, their perception, their experience, their means of processing tactile, visual and acoustic stimuli, their spatial orientation and temporal rhythm—and all these things are what aesthetics meant at one time, according to its original definition as a theory of sensory perception—then one could logically expect to find these things expressed in special forms of mimetic transformation. Put emphatically, this would mean that within the framework of a female cosmology there would be a changed relationship between the subjective artistic appropriation of reality on the one hand, and formal suggestiveness and receptive perception on the other. But it will be nearly impossible to find categorical evidence for this changed relationship: reality is not that logical, and there is no female cosmology either.

There is no proof of a different (female) relationship to detail and generality, to motionlessness and movement, to rhythm and demeanor. I find the only sensible approach to be the search for evidence within individual, concrete texts (pictures, films, etc.), as Virginia Woolf once attempted with Dorothy Richardson's writing.

**Virginia Woolf on the language of Dorothy Richardson:**<sup>10</sup>  
*She has invented, or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the ex-*

*treme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes. Other writers of the opposite sex have used sentences of this description and stretched them to the extreme. But there is a difference. Miss Richardson has fashioned her sentence consciously, in order that it may descend to the depths and investigate the crannies of Miriam Henderson's consciousness. It is a woman's sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything that she may discover in the psychology of her sex.*

Dorothy Richardson on the masculine manner of writing:<sup>11</sup>  
*The self-satisfied, complacent, know-all condescendingness of their handling of their material. . . . The torment of all novels is what is left out. The moment you are aware of it there is torment in them. Bang, bang, bang, on they go, these men's books, like an L.L.C. tram, yet unable to make you forget them, the authors, for a moment.*

The exclusion of women from vast areas of production and the public sphere and the fact that most women have been responsible for the biological and social reproduction of the species, as well as the economic, if they are working, has directed women's imagination along other lines. Moreover, the much touted "ahistoricity" of women kept the polarity between intellectual labor and manual labor from becoming too traumatic. The disparate development of the sexes, though origin of so much of women's suffering, fortunately has not yet allowed women's behavior and needs to become reified to the degree found in advanced capitalism. But generations of women paid for this with their banishment into the marital ghetto.

Is there a feminine aesthetic? Certainly there is, if one is talking about *aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception*. Certainly not, if one is talking about an unusual variant of artistic production or about a painstakingly constructed theory of art. Women's break with the formal, intrinsic laws of a given medium, the release of their imagination—these are unpredictable for an art with feminist intentions. There is, thank heavens, no premeditated strategy which can predict what happens when female sensuality is freed. Because it is a process and historically tentative, we cannot verbally anticipate this freeing of feminine sensuality either at its traditional erotic center (even though there's a lot going on there every month) or in the context of individual choice. We can do it only on the basis of a movement by women for women.

The important thing is that women artists will not let themselves be kept back anymore. They work on canvas, they make films and videotapes, they write and sculpt, they work with metal and with fabric, they are on stage. So let us take a look at what they are doing.

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1. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York, 1970), p. 161.
  2. George Sand, *Meine Lebensbeichte* (Berlin-Leipzig, no date), p. 98.
  3. Karl Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst* (Berlin, 1908), p. 29.
  4. Chantal Akerman, interview with Claudia Aleman in *Frauen und Film*, 7 (March, 1976).
  5. Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, p. 159.
  6. Verena Stefan, *Hautungen* (1975), English translation under the title *Shedding* (translation by Johanna Moore and Beth Weckmueller) to be published in Spring, 1978 by Daughters, Inc., New York.
  7. Lucy Lippard, "Warum separierte Frauenkunst?" in *Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativität*.
  8. Frieda Grafe, "Ein anderer Eindruck vom Begriff meines Körpers," in *Filmkritik* (March, 1976).
  9. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London, 1963), p. 88.
  10. Virginia Woolf, "Romance and the Heart" in *Contemporary Writers*, p. 124f.
  11. Dorothy Richardson, *Dawn's Left Hand*, p. 202f.

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