Why Not Feminist Aesthetic Theory?

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In light of its own preoccupations and its place in the history of philosophy, aesthetic theory and the aesthetic itself would appear to be ideal sites of women’s expression. But, contrary to such expectation, women are rarely listed among aesthetic theorists. I will address the anomaly of women’s absence and suggest that a feminist contribution to aesthetic theory would be of great philosophical value. I will discuss three factors that appear to have influenced women’s exclusion; before considering these, however, I must remind readers of some standard features of the philosophical representation of women and some elementary ideas from the history of aesthetics. My aim here is less to analyze or evaluate these philosophical conventions than to recall their relevance to the anomaly in question. I will then consider a possible alternative aesthetic theory that is being progressively developed by feminist women. Finally, I will express the hope that such an aesthetic theory will be promising for the advancement of philosophy in general.

The Essence of Man Is Reason

Embodiment, according to a Western tradition that begins with Plato, if not earlier, is a burden to be borne, sometimes to be enjoyed, but ideally to be transcended. For 2500 years, traditional philosophy has exalted human beings, as distinct from brute nature, chiefly as minds that in moments of triumphal liberation achieve a state of real or figurative disembodiment. The capacity for self-transformation and transcendence is cultivated—through mental aptitude as a first choice, but also through disciplined physical exertion as a second. The body is not wholly or invariably denied, but is represented as functioning on a subordinate track shared with the “lower” animals and thus requiring control. A variety of religious, ecstatic, intellectual, virtual, and drug-induced techniques have been devised to assist the mind in its surveillance of the body and to free it, temporarily if not permanently, from its corporeal confinement.

For woman it has always been otherwise. Though provided with a rudimentary rational capacity (dismissed by Aristotle as “without authority”), woman’s designated nature leaves no options for liberation from the body. Her body and its predetermined reproductive capacities are her destiny. I should note that these necessarily also include the charms of seductiveness as well as the tenderness and patience required for the care of children and men. Whatever man-like tran-
scendence woman might achieve contingently (and plainly within her ability), it violates her nature and endangers her natural state of immanence (to use an odd existentialist locution).

I will not linger over this familiar gender distinction. Some may think it archaic, and in practical terms it surely is, but its metaphysical profundity and embedded prevalence in the theory and practice of all cultures, and especially in their common language, haunt real women even now and prevent their achievement of full humanity.

**Historical Aesthetic Theory**

Philosophical aesthetics, although its roots are traceable to ancient Greece, actually began in eighteenth-century Europe, simultaneously with the creation of the concept of fine art.² Obviously, there were people, whom we now designate as artists, who were producing paintings, poems, sculptures, musical performances, dances, and works of architecture long before the eighteenth century; but these products of art were not previously linked by a conceptual identification that isolated and demarcated them from other skilled products of artisanship as “works of fine art.” The people who made them were doers and makers who functioned in society according to the conventions of their times as guild members, courtiers, servants, teachers, or wanderers. They plied their trade, sometimes living off it, but their work was not mystified. Genius was a generic spirit, of sometimes local character, and its performance might have brought renown, but not immortality. The emergence of fine art as distinct from the products of craft or science or other useful activity is a fascinating social phenomenon, which I will not explore here; with it, there also emerged a science that came to be called aesthetics, whose paradigm object of study was experience of the newly conceived entities.³

The term aesthetics was first applied in 1735 by the Leibnizian philosopher Alexander Baumgarten to refer to a science of sensory perception. Baumgarten held (1954) that sense knowledge was a lesser form of cognition than intellectual understanding, but still a methodical means to acquiring probable knowledge. From the very beginning then, aesthetics had an uneliminable physical reference, the object perceived, and was therefore on a lower plane than the disembodied science of noetic objects that was glorified by the rationalist school of Descartes. Nonetheless, there was a place for aesthetics—and for at least a century it was a science that retained explicit ties to its cognitive origin.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the discipline of aesthetics was subtly transformed. It shed its association with ordinary sensation and related instead to a category of judgment, known as taste. It had a lingering connection to immediate perceptual experience, but also involved an evaluative appreciation that appealed to a standard. Aesthetic judgment thus occupied a middle ground that was quasi-cognitive and quasi-emotive (affective); on the one hand, it appealed to objective and universal criteria, but, on the other hand, it unmistakeably re-
lied on an initial subjective stimulus. The identification of beauty entailed a response that was subjectively pleasurable. The individual making the judgment of taste must be subjectively affected, although the judgment makes a claim that is more than a report of that private experience. The domain of the aesthetic is thus a hybrid, separated both from abstract, speculative truth (the realm of pure science) and from practical concrete interest (the moral as well as prudential sphere).4

This brings me to the anomaly indicated above. Granting (for the moment) women's primary corporeality and diminished intellectual orientation, one might expect the (inferior) "science of aesthetics"—residually composed of reason and sensibility—to be women's special strength, but this view has never been defended. There are even fewer known women aestheticians than artists, and only an embryonic feminist aesthetic theory.5 I want to consider why women are absent from a scene that seems eminently fitted for their particular (diminutive) qualifications.

In order to discuss this issue, however, I must first make a terminological clarification regarding what a feminist perspective, as distinct from a woman's perspective, on aesthetics might be. I need to make this distinction because, as you may have noticed, the only characterization of women discussed so far derives entirely from a male perspective. However much women may have been complicit with that representation, and many women have undoubtedly perpetuated it, it is a view of women that understands them only and exclusively in terms of their relation to men. And that is not a feminist position.

A feminist is a person of any gender who holds an ideological conviction opposing inherent male supremacy and female subordination in any dimension whatsoever. Most feminists also believe that gender is a historically significant category of discrimination.6 Most feminists are women, but many women are not feminists. The adjective feminist refers to a deliberately held political position. It is not to be confused with the adjective feminine, which frequently modifies women's appearance or behavior, especially that dictated or approved by men. Long familiarity with the standards of femininity can certainly shape a woman's outlook on the world and even enable her to bring up daughters accordingly, but to do that is not implicitly to adhere to an original ideology. A feminine aesthetic—if there is such a thing—would conform to the dualistic categories of a masculinist system, making explicit the complementarities that, according to such a system, inform feminine quiescence. Femininity is simply the obverse of masculinity and therefore begs the very question that feminists challenge. Only from a feminist perspective can one intelligibly wonder about the absence of women from the theoretical discourse of aesthetics.

THE EXCLUSION OF WOMEN FROM CONVENTIONAL AESTHETICS

Since the eighteenth century (culminating in 1790 with Immanuel Kant's Critique of Judgment), works of fine art have represented the paradigm of aesthetic
objects and the model candidate for aesthetic experience. Everyone acknowledges that we are capable of aesthetically enjoying all sorts of other entities—from natural landscapes to good dinners and mathematical equations—but aestheticians inevitably come back to discussing the "stand-alone" artwork that is deliberately produced (or at least selected) for the purpose of evoking aesthetic appreciation. Typically, aestheticians also concentrate on positive aesthetic experience, that is, judgments of beauty and its correlates (grace, harmony, organic unity, etc.), although here, too, it is acknowledged that pronouncements of ugliness and its correlates (clumsiness, disharmony, confusion) must also count as (negative) aesthetic judgments. A subsidiary note is that deeply negative judgments lapse over into the moral domain, and so the very possibility of a wholly aversive work of art is debatable.

Aesthetic theory has notably represented its domain as distinct from the theoretical (speculative) concerns of science or ordinary knowledge and also the practical interest of day-to-day living, economic survival, and moral decision making. This is not to say that these subjects are not treated within works of art; novels, paintings, dances, and musical works often depict moral situations or impart information. Anyone who has seen the recent spate of Jane Austen films is likely to have learned something about the manners and mores of eighteenth-century middle-class England, or at least about its furniture and clothing. The point is that the aesthetic success of these works does not depend on the accuracy, truth, or moral propriety of what they profess. This is what the concept of the autonomy of art means—that, as art, an object is not reducible to its moral or substantive lessons, and, as art, it is not to be judged by them. It is, rather, to be judged "disinterestedly" according to its own separate standards. That doctrine is the heart of modern formalism; it holds that any representation or reference is suspect and must be defended against interpretations that reattach it to life on other than aesthetic grounds.

I should point out that very few people today hold such an extreme aestheticist position, and this has much to do with the current commingling of high art and popular art forms. That juncture cuts both ways however: The lion growling out of the Metro Goldwyn Mayer film seal is inscribed in a banner that proclaims "Ars Gratia Artis" ("Art for the Sake of Art"), even where it is grossly commercial; and art is still protected from life (if not from Congress) by many, sometimes questionable, conventions that abstract and exalt it. This historic continuity of aesthetic elevation may provide some clue to the prolonged exclusion of women from aesthetic theory—and their parallel relegation to the pedestal. I now turn to that exclusion.

The Cognitive Trace

One condition that obstructs women's entry to the field is the residual assimilation of aesthetics to epistemology. The earliest theory of art, which genuinely has its roots in Greek theorizing, affirms that art is essentially imitation—a prac-
tice deplored by Plato and conditionally approved by Aristotle. Among the satisfactions to be derived from imitation, when successful, is that one acquires (a sort of) knowledge of that which is imitated. Those who imitate best, even Plato would agree, are those who have the fullest, most accurate knowledge of the subject. Unfortunately (Plato says, but not everyone agrees with him), artists tend to depict superficial qualities, which, because they are pleasingly rendered, are doubly deceptive since they divert attention away from the genuine article (see Apology). The standard by which art is to be judged is thus, implicitly, Truth—although often not truth as given in experience, but as idealized, as abstractly known. And, obviously, this disqualifies women, who lack the means of apprehending Truth, from either producing or appreciating art. Without the capacity for abstraction, women are hopelessly mired in the concrete given of experience.

The predilection for what is abstractly understood, a product of intellectual calculation, led many philosophers and especially theologians, to consider the visual arts (which necessarily appeal to the senses) as inferior to the temporal and more conceptual art of literature. This assessment does not include all literature, since it, too, can be sensual and descriptive of earthy matters. The literature admired by the arbiters of taste as fine art frequently disdains earthiness or comedy (even Shakespeare had some enemies among the classical judges of aesthetic quality). In the visual arts, too, idealization occupies a higher rank than the realism of, say, genre painting. Much as we may admire an artist’s skill at rendering specific detail—and this does require cognitive aptitude, since we learn historical facts from accurate description—aesthetic quality is a function, not of the quantity of information that a work embodies and imparts, but of its form and integration. Sensed features such as balance, harmony, completeness are not singular perceptual qualities of an object, but have something in common with the “rightness” of mathematical proofs and the “elegance” of scientific demonstrations. Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his Discourses on Art (1770), advises aspiring artists to think deeply, not to stoop to “mere” imitation, but to strive for intellectual grandeur. The great artist, he says, “like the philosopher, will consider nature in the abstract, and represent in every one of his figures the character of its species” (letter 3).

So, if, as Walter Pater was later to say, “All art constantly aspires to the condition of music” (1986, 86), this is not (alone) because of its sensuous sonority, but because that condition obliterates the oppressive claims of matter and thus approximates the state of pure contemplative knowledge. Ideally it is unencumbered by bodily awareness altogether. Classical (eighteenth-century) aestheticians distinguished between the beautiful and the sublime, identifying the former with the softer, homier, more womanly qualities of sensuous prettiness and the latter with the powerful, suprasensual world of unencumbered form. Modern art and modernist aesthetics still exalt the sublimity of cognizable form above all content, implicitly linking high moral purpose (and masculinity) with the representation of abstract universal structures of meaning and expression.
Even the nude, that most sensuous of physical objects, is rarefied aesthetically (albeit that elevated status seems to be unobserved by some technicians in photo-laboratories who still refuse to print snapshots of naked babies). Writing in the twentieth century, Kenneth Clark says, “And the nude gains its enduring value from the fact that it reconciles several contrary states. It takes the most sensual and immediately interesting object, the human body, and puts it out of reach of time and desire; it takes the most purely rational concept of which mankind is capable, mathematical order, and makes it a delight to the senses” (1956, 50). Ironically, the object most commonly used since the Renaisance to model formal order is the body of that supremely nonrational creature—woman. How convenient for the (male) artist and his (male) audience that they may sagely gaze upon the desired female body (or its image) and congratulate themselves all the while on the purity of their rapturous appreciation of disembodied rational order. Well, tell that to the pornographers!

Women, by contrast, are rarely out of reach of time and desire, and they are alienated from these associations by long-cultivated (dis)inclination as much as by positive exclusion. Although times are changing, centuries of education have effectively confined most women to the world of concrete particulars. Trained to attend to the immediate and the domestic sphere, women are discouraged from the pursuit of fundamental science. The same learned incapacity for the abstract must deter them from the premises of traditional aesthetics. If women see only bodies and babies where men allegedly see divine reason, obviously women are unfit appreciators just as they are incompetent knowers. Women, of course, do see bodies and babies, whom they must feed and comfort, and few have the opportunity to indulge in contemplation of the abstract mysteries of ideal proportion and perfect form. Women’s intuition and emotional sensibility, alleged to compensate their (abstract) cognitive disadvantage, works to their disadvantage once again, impeding success even at the secondary science of sensation for which, according to stereotype, they would appear to be well adapted.

CONCEPTUAL OBFUSCATION OF PRACTICAL CREATIVITY

A second constraint on women’s contribution to aesthetic theorizing is practical. Creativity has been appropriated (by men) as a projective activity closed to women. Women were not allowed to study in academies of artistic learning except under the tutelage of artist fathers or brothers, and, above all, women were not permitted to sculpt or paint from the nude. Describing an 1885 photo of women studying art under Thomas Eakins (an anatomist of rare proficiency), Linda Nochlin (1988) says: They are working from a cow—or maybe a bull—the nether parts are obscured. Nochlin’s point is that institutional prohibitions, and not individual inability, have been the chief obstacles to women’s entry as artists into the field of creative art. (They could, of course, enter as models.) Similar practical constraints have disabled women as aestheticians.
Neither “nether parts” nor creativity are actually foreign to women’s experience. It is disconcerting at the least to reflect about a subject that is so mystified and tantalizingly obscured, the more so when one has good reason to believe that, in principle, one understands the subject very well. Women are in this position with respect to creativity, a condition frequently alluded to in the discourse of aesthetics by metaphors of pregnancy, gestation, and birth. One might expect women to have some intimate understanding of these subjects. Ironically, women’s domestic preoccupations—cooking, nurturing, bearing and raising children—thought to be entirely unconscious when women perform them, are a common source of the expressions used to describe the deliberate artistic productivity of men, who stew, incubate, hatch, and seamlessly create with abandon. The metaphor of divine command, a calling forth of order out of chaos or of making something out of nothing, is also invoked to describe male creativity. Women rarely think of applying such dramatic imagery to their own generative endeavors. One does not decree “Let there be a two-year-old!” or will that “this messy house become clean!” Yet women do tend to find creative satisfaction in the slow, transformative efforts of civilizing children, producing meals, enhancing spaces, or making a dwelling habitable.

In the masculinist world of aesthetic theory, these quiet activities pass unnoticed and creativity is conceived imperatively and as more or less violent, discontinuous, and personally aggrandizing. If, by their own admission, women lack both the ambition and the capacity for such noisy achievement, one may well suppose their appreciative and judgmental abilities to be likewise impaired. As aestheticians, women must then operate with a double handicap, and whatever they say can only be derivative. The problem, however, may lie with the model and not with the performer. Why confine creativity to such a narrow band of movements that only a small spectrum of behaviors qualify as instances?¹⁶

**Overcoming Object Status**

A third incapacitating function is women’s status as aesthetic object rather than subject. The “male gaze” has by now become a descriptive commonplace especially with respect to film theory and visual representations of women (see Mulvey 1985, 1989). John Berger’s essay “Ways of Seeing Women” (1972) has done as much as anything could to make the historical point that images of women are invariably constructed to appeal to male (and heterosexual) judgment even where that vantage point is taken and internalized by the well-socialized woman. What is less frequently stressed is that such judgment equally, if more indirectly, constructs most, if not all, perceptual situations—not only the observation of human figures. The male gaze is normative because that perspective is the publicly sanctioned vantage point, whether of a landscape, an interior, or a domestic scene—in short, of anything visible. Any other perspective is labeled deviant. Women are not merely habituated to self-observation according to that standard (as Berger notes), but learn as well to see everything with double vision, to take
in both the so-called "normal" vista of, for example, a room or street that is presented to the male gaze and the deviant view that is phenomenologically their own (e.g., a space to be traversed with self-conscious embarrassment or with the fear of menace). The male gaze is not limited to males, but is the "law of the land." Women see accordingly, but their adaptation to that vision is compounded with an "outlaw" gaze that intersects with and abrades against it.

Might such enriched or complexified vision not be an enhancement to aesthetic competence? It would seem that the capacity for multiplied insights should, so to speak, enlarge the data base from which aesthetic wisdom is drawn. Ideally that would be the case, and I will argue that it is an advantage from the perspective of an aesthetic theory that thrives on textural density. But in the world in which we live, complexity, which clouds discernment, is unwelcome both conceptually and in fact. Simplification is valued for the sake of domination, and this is debilitating to women. Looking beyond the evasion of multiplicity, we find that aesthetic judgment is neither universal nor neutral (nor disinterested), as its classical proponents maintain, but that it follows a favored paradigm. Consistent with its originating metaphysics and epistemology, the paradigm assigns active status to the (male) subject/artist/viewer (who gazes) and passivity to the (feminized) object (that is gazed at), once again reinforcing both the functional and the cognitive disempowerment of women. Women who study and profess philosophical aesthetic theory find themselves as much in a double bind as women artists or critics. They are sometimes exquisitely competent exegesis, but their remarkable ability to explicate and replicate does not imply the universality of the theory reproduced (much less its excellence), but reveals only the power of its coercive mystification (see Le Doeuff 1987).

Calling attention to the objectification of women in the art and aesthetic theory of Western culture does not suffice, however, to point the way toward a new and nonobjectifying philosophy. It does not even amount to a *prima facie* condemnation of the practice, for one might declare the subject-object hierarchy metaphysically right and good, thereby simply affirming male supremacy as a natural fact. A theoretical case needs to be made for an alternative, and this cannot be achieved by the mere declaration that women, too, are subjects, since, as I hope is clear, the very notion of active subjectivity entails a passive (i.e., feminized) object and so is intrinsically masculinist and presumptively heterosexist. Opening the doors of opportunity to women (which is in fact being done) does not alter the structure of the spaces thereby accessed. It simply increases the proportion of women qualified as men (i.e., as subjects); it does not reduce the gender disparity whose preservation is constitutive of the duality of the system and essential to its being. A system that would abandon the imbalance of the subject/object relation together with gender asymmetry is the object of feminist inquiry. A feminist aesthetic theory also has that end in view, and to achieve that end, it must overcome the debilitating initial condition of object status.

The obstacles that hinder women's progress in aesthetic theorizing are thus (1) the historic association of aesthetics with cognition, a capacity held defi-
cient in women; (2) women’s lack of access to the recognized forms of aesthetic creative practice coupled with the mystification of that practice;\textsuperscript{17} and (3) women’s consignment to the status of aesthetic object rather than productive agent, and their resulting complex/confused understanding of that condition. These impediments to aesthetic philosophizing are painful, but may be the proverbial irritant that now energizes a great deal of feminist reflection.

\textbf{Toward a Feminist Aesthetics}

As indicated, a feminist perspective does not simply elevate women to the status of men to share an already defined point of view. It would be logically as well as ethically incongruous (one might say grotesque) to adopt a position that requires one’s own subordination (or that of others “like” oneself.) The primary task for feminists is therefore to dismantle the falsely universal position and to replace it with a more adequate philosophy. However, this can happen only in stages, not only because men will resist, but women will do so also—they have been educated to revere identical rules. Feminists must think through the process by degrees and from within, while forging a new language to supercede the old one.

The enterprise of formulating a feminist aesthetic theory has, by now, passed through several stages. It began, as most feminisms seem to have been initiated, with the recognition of absence. Why were there no “great” women artists? No female aestheticians or critics? Why were the things that women made, though often cherished and found aesthetically pleasing, not valued as \textit{fine art}? Why were women's books and paintings, even when released into the public sphere, invariably classified as “minor” or “secondary” art (as primitive, popular, decorative, amateur, naïve, or domestic) and why are they soon forgotten? The discovery of absence in the arts, as in science and history, led to an immediate clamor for rectification, a pressure to do compensatory history. Scholars combed the records to reclaim lost foremothers in every field—and did indeed find them. But the search led to further puzzles. Why was the existence of these women obscured? Might there have been others who were altogether erased or whose talent (genius, perhaps?) was prevented from reaching fruition? What were the conditions that impeded their emergence? The quest to solve these puzzles revealed a pattern of obfuscation and denial. More important, doubts were engendered about the validity of the criteria by which the original judgments were made. If the standards of art, science, or historical worthiness in general are prejudicial, biased to exclude a moiety of humankind, could they be trusted? And if they are untrustworthy, what alternative standards should replace them?

A second phase of feminist reflection turned from the reclamation of excluded persons in compliance with existing standards—an essentially liberal humanist enterprise—to the correction of the standards. What was wrong with the things that women did? Why did they not “count” as art (or science or significant historical, economic, or ethical activity)? Indeed, they seemed to be
very fine, humane things that merit valorization, and so feminists shifted their ground from equalization to the celebration of difference. Accepting the "intransigent fact" of gender asymmetry, feminists sought proudly to explore the positive and underanalyzed phenomenology of female experience in its own right, and not as reactive or complementary to men's behavior. This phase of feminism, heavily indebted to psychoanalytic theory, French feminist theory, and early developments in postmodernism, focused to a large extent on women's sexuality and affective interactions. The explosion of women's literature and art—much of it celebratory—and most of the women's studies programs in academic institutions were a consequence of this historical moment.

This moment represented a legitimation of gender identity according to extant conditions, and, as such, it could not elude its own historicizing context. The dilemma now loomed: If we assent to gender identity, celebratory or not, we concur with an essentialism that intensifies the discrepancy between male and female while ignoring the differences within gender (class, race, sexual preference, tastes, etc.). Yet, if we deny difference, we disadvantage ourselves competitively in a world that punishes women for the qualities that they share and that they are compelled by an inequitable system to acquire. It was clear that neither assimilation nor oppositionism is possible. A phase of critical reassessment that generates new models that accommodate distinct subjectivities without reifying them as essential must be ushered in.

Jane Duran, a feminist epistemologist who draws upon canonic Anglo-American naturalized theories (Quine, Kornblith, Goldman), as well as the work of feminist theorists (Bordo, Keller, Harding, Hartsock), says that "it is an upshot of our model that knowledge acquisition—epistemic justification—is a context-and culture-related process" (1991, 185). It is necessarily pluralistic, thus differing fundamentally from the acontextual, universalist Cartesian model of knowledge. Duran proceeds to turn to such unconventional philosophical antecedents as Maxine Hong Kingston, an Asian-American (1977); Paula Giddings, a Black American (1985); Paula Gunn Allen, a Native American (1986); and Maria Lugones, a Latina philosopher (1987). All of these authors stress the importance of relinquishing rigid categories, of a perceptive openness that permits spontaneous responsiveness to the immediate and unexpected; above all, they agree on the unique importance of oral and nonverbal communication.

Without pronouncing a divisive relativism, these women nonetheless affirm a contextualized normativity that implies neither skepticism nor irrationality. Without abandoning the scrutiny of evidence that is better or worse, they nonetheless greatly expand the catalogue of what is to count as acceptable evidence. The list includes a number of nonverbal and gestural (i.e., traditionally nonepistemic) implements of communication commonly used in ordinary life. Flushed faces and sweaty palms, for example, when contextually read, are not infallible, but they are remarkably good detectors of mendacity. Only a culture that exalts disembodiment could ignore the wealth of information that is transmitted by miniscule bodily inclinations. Perhaps their very debarment from
epistemic legitimacy has sensitized women to the broad and subtle range of nonstandard knowing. Paradoxically, the amplitude of such overlooked resources provides a space for enlarging epistemological theory and for feminist aesthetic theorizing.

Proposing an "eroticized" theory of knowledge, Duran notes that "it is inconceivable that the hallmark of a gynocentric epistemology could be knowledge divorced from the senses" (1991, 202). Moreover, the epistemology she foreshadows is grounded in sensibility, an awareness of intentionality—one's own and that of others—that approximates an aesthetic sensibility. Duran suggests a reversal of the conventional cognitive hierarchy. Instead of regarding "the science of the senses" as secondary and derivative from the primary science of the intellect, we might consider the latter as a dessicated remnant of the former.

Feminists have made great advances in theoretical criticism. Together and sometimes in agreement with Marxists, postmodernists, and a number of other ideological critics of traditional Western philosophy, feminism has stood against the anti-corporeal, anti-emotivist, distanced, and noncontextualized premises of the canonic Western tradition; but feminism cannot rest with rejection or reactivity alone. To do so would not replace, but only reassert, the familiar ruling dichotomy that feminists are eager to dethrone. It is therefore vital that feminists move beyond negation to positive theory building, and this must be the next phase of our activity.

The Relevance of Aesthetics to Philosophy

The work has already begun in a number of areas, and I believe that aesthetic reflection can assist its progress. What aesthetic theory has to offer is of crucial importance—in part for the very reason that its history has been considered peripheral to mainstream philosophy and has therefore enjoyed secluded exploratory space in which to develop and mature. Its pretension to disinterestedness notwithstanding, the domain of the aesthetic and therefore its theory are profoundly integrated with our substantive lives. Feminist theory, likewise, is substantially tied to androcentric theorizing by its own history and cannot divorce itself altogether from that formative context. The language whose connotation we seek to modify—such concepts as subjectivity, groundedness, and context-dependency—is rooted in androcentric philosophy. A reappraisal that subverts existing problematics for feminist ends should not be understood as an embrace of the rejected condition, but must work as both a repudiation and a new interpretation of conventional thought. Duran makes the surprisingly comforting observation that, while innovative perspectives are called for in order to develop a new feminist epistemology, they may be less revolutionary than we think.

It may well be that reading between the lines of past theorizing, even of work that is nonfeminist, may reveal unsuspected or suppressed patterns of thought that prefigure those ideas that must now be brought to the surface and analyzed.
The point of any theorizing, after all, is not just to invent ways of thinking that are wholly new to this earth, but is rather to articulate inchoate thoughts that promise to help us understand the world as we encounter it. Traditionally overlooked ways in which women actually do think, talk, feel, and act must undoubtedly have left traces, even where these were overlaid by antagonistic or formulaic androcentric expression. Uncovering these, along with the mechanisms used to suppress them, is a first step toward retrieval of significant evidence.

Some of that evidence is written, and some of it is even written by men. But a large body of it will be found in the ignored material record of women's lives. The shape of women's embodied thought, inseparable in fact from the structure of their feelings, is transmitted daily through myriad activities that are inscribed in the physical artifacts of living—and these, too, are a source of theory. Because the realm of the aesthetic is also grounded in corporeal communication, I stress and hold great hope for aesthetic theory as a guide to feminist theory. Perhaps the least linguistically bound of all our philosophical discourses, since it begins and ends in experience, aesthetic theory is most at home with the expressiveness of matter and the volatile stuff of feeling. It is the business of aesthetics to move with the tides of physical and technological change and to resist its own ideological congealment. Even traditional formalists are compelled to adjust to ever-new formations of potential order and must welcome chaos and complexity with eternal optimism.

Theory is rarely an occasion for optimism, but I think there is an affirmative trend in the eagerness with which theoreticians are currently embracing all kinds of complexity and questioning those conventional systems that "work" chiefly by imposing tyrannical constraints. Innovators in many fields are beginning to think differently about such iron-clad dualisms as mind and body, masculine and feminine, and intellect and feeling. We are beginning to understand that emotions are not the irrational and uncontrollable forces described by philosophers since Plato or the stylized caricatures of eighteenth-century taxonomies. Both intelligent and educable, emotions inform us about the world and about ourselves in ways that greatly enrich and complicate the abstract structures of intellectual design. For centuries, the realm of emotion has been subordinated to intellect, but at last we are learning to learn constructively from feeling.

Emotion has always been a puzzling and sometimes embarrassing ingredient, even of aesthetic experience. Those seeking to exalt that experience by detaching it from ordinary affect have postulated a unique "aesthetic" emotion or attitude with limited realization. Meanwhile, others, including feminists, relate aesthetic experience to ordinary pleasures, such as that of the palate (taste in its familiar sense) or associated sensuous and personal memories (see Korsmeyer and Feagin 1996). A sexualized, if sublimated, element has been introduced by psychoanalytic theory into both the production and the enjoyment of aesthetic objects—though in a decidedly androcentric fashion. Of interest to feminists in all these representations of emotion, as figuring in aesthetic analysis, is a poten-
tial admission of far greater diversity and more layered complexity than has been permitted by binary theories in the past.

We can learn from aesthetic pleasure that aesthetic theory requires an improved analysis to encompass negative and a variety of positive experiences, simultaneously and nondisjunctively undergone. We cannot sustain the delusion that a single attractant, Beauty, however defined, draws people to witness horror, violence, cruelty, and ugliness—but these are unmistakeably sources of aesthetic pleasure. So, pleasure in all its ramifications, some of them hurtful, demands a sophisticated feminist analysis. That might be a good start to illuminate a world fully and mindfully experienced—by women as well as by men.

I do not know exactly what a feminist analysis of aesthetic enjoyment will yield, or what a fully developed feminist aesthetic theory would look like, but I am hopeful that, by avoiding simplistic dichotomies and biased exclusions, we will achieve greater wisdom than we have found up to this point. The chief contribution that feminist theory seems to have made to philosophy thus far is that it has enlarged both the range of persons who “count” and the variety of entities that serve as evidence in philosophical reflection. I suggest that Duran’s salvage of epistemic territory for women lends hope for a feminist aesthetic theory that will open the way to a better, more comprehensive understanding of the world than previous philosophies, absent the minds of women, have produced.19

NOTES

1. Of course, until recently women have been excluded from all but a few intellectual, professional, and physical activities. My point is that the specific character of aesthetics and the subjects with which it deals seem to be closer to the permitted feminine occupations than, say, mathematics, engineering, or soldiering. An excellent discussion of the peculiar form that women’s absence takes, even from activities for which they are well qualified, can be found in an essay by Le Doeuff, “Women and Philosophy” (1987).

2. Art historians disagree over the beginning of their subject. I am linking it with the writing of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who has been called “the father of modern art history.” According to Carrier, unlike Winckelmann’s predecessor Giorgio Vasari, author of a Cinquecento Who’s Who in the arts, Winckelmann “offers a systematic analysis of individual works, and a detailed history of the rise, development and decline of ancient art” (1991, 122; see also Belting 1987).

3. In her exploration of the historical concept of genius, Battersby (1990) portrays the transformation of an initially feminine tutelary spirit into a heroic, emotionally fulgurating, male spirit that, in the Enlightenment, becomes associated with the sublime.

4. One might argue that Kant’s third Critique and the deluge of his followers solves this problem. They do not, although Schiller comes close. They fail because their strategy is to transcend both sense and reason, while the aesthetic does not rise above either.

5. With the exception of Suzanne Langer, very few women appear in the standard anthologies of aesthetics until the present moment. Within the last two decades, as edited volumes of essays from current journals have become fashionable, women are beginning to appear in collections that include contemporary, especially feminist, aesthetic theory.

6. I specify most rather than all because there are liberal feminists who discount gender as a fundamental ground of distinction; these feminists hold that humanity is a singular category whose subdivisions are contingent. There are also postmodern feminists who regard gender as a socially constructed artifice designed in the interest of political domination. There are, moreover, nonfeminists who believe that gender is fundamental, but is not intrinsically a basis of invidious discrimination (see Illich 1982).
7. Kant himself was not nearly as rigid about the paradigm as his formalist successors. We are indebted to Kant for the distinction between that beauty of design which depends only on form and that adventitious beauty whose charm gratifies the senses (1790, 2.14). Kant also distinguishes between free beauty, which presupposes no concept, and adherent (or dependent) beauty, which involves a concept and therefore an adequation of the representation to an object. His example of the former is a flower, a "free body of nature"; of the latter, a man, a horse, or a building, all of which presuppose a concept of the end that defines the thing (3.16). Thus, for Kant, works of art are not even paradigmatic aesthetic objects.

8. Santayana argues that the aesthetic is, for the most part, positive. When the ugly becomes vitally repulsive, "its presence becomes a real evil towards which we assume a practical and moral attitude" ([1896] 1955, 17). This issue bears on the discussion of pornography, whose defense often pits aesthetic merit against social disvalue or, alternatively, aesthetic ugliness against a socially redemptive function.

9. According to Plato, these people are philosophers and would prefer to spend their time with real objects rather than with imitations, but they are better equipped than anyone else to recognize the merit of an imitation.

10. Questions regarding the existence and discernment of uniquely aesthetic qualities and/or their relation to ordinary properties of things were examined in the 1950s and 1960s by analytic philosophers, notably Sibley (see 1959, 1965). A small industry was briefly generated by that work and interest in it has recently been rekindled by the death of Sibley.

11. For an illuminating discussion of this passage, see Herzog (1996).

12. An entire section on gender and eighteenth-century aesthetic theory is included in Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics (Brand and Korsmeyer 1995; see esp. essays by Mattick and Gould).

13. Charges of child abuse have been brought against such notable child photographers as Sally Mann and, recently in Boston, against a young art student whose images of her four-year-old son urinating were seized by police who were summoned by a processing lab technician.

14. Following out this reasoning, one might conclude, as suggested above, that women are particularly well qualified for the singular acts of apprehension and appreciation entailed in the critical enjoyment (if not the creation) of works of art. However, women critics and connoisseurs appear to be no more plentiful than women aestheticians or artists. Perhaps something more than "aptitudes" and "dispositions" is at issue.

15. I am told that Eakins himself was punished by the Philadelphia Academy of Art for allowing female students into his nude drawing class.

16. The obvious response to this question is that to do otherwise is to "lower" standards; however, it is not self-evident that a departure from narrow standards is a "lowering." An infinite regress may loom on the horizon, but that is not a sufficient reason to disregard alternatives.

17. Women today are no longer excluded from the opportunity to study art-making, but they do not receive equal recognition as artists and have difficulty displaying or selling their work. Women are significantly underrepresented in galleries and museums, a situation that has elicited imaginative political protest on the part of "Guerrilla Girls" and by other, more conventional means.

18. Probably the most famous example of this type of revalorization was carried out by Carol Gilligan, whose study of girls' ethical judgment, In a Different Voice (1982), became a pattern for non-invidious gender discrimination.

19. I am grateful to a not-quite-anonymous reviewer (thank you, CK) for suggestions to improve this essay, and I have tried to follow her excellent advice.

Works Cited
Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Judgment.
Plato. Apology.
Reynolds, Sir Joshua. 1770. Discourses on Art.