

# Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics

Edited by

Andrew Benjamin & Peter Osborne

Philosophical Forum

Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1991

**ICA**

# Situating the Aesthetic: a Feminist Defence

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For many philosophers writing in the analytic tradition, David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scot, was the father of philosophy. Analogies have been made between his gently ironic account of the psychological origins of metaphysical 'ideas' and Ludwig Wittgenstein's more playful (more modern) scepticism towards metaphysical language and metaphysical problems. But Hume – at least the narrowed-down, tidied-up Hume of the analytic philosophers – was at his least exciting when writing about matters of taste. For this Hume believed that all knowledge derives from experience, and then reduced all questions about a 'standard of taste' to questions about a consensus: in effect, advocating a kind of opinion poll of properly educated connoisseurs with sensibilities fine enough (but not *over-refined*) to be able to respond accurately and adequately to qualities inherent in the object or art-work assessed. Hume compared aesthetic taste to wine-tasting: 'good' and 'bad', 'beautiful' and 'sublime' qualities in objects were discriminated by a highly-trained élite who articulated the preferences of the common man.

Given such an account of aesthetic taste, the radical move into an attack on such a notion is obvious. For who are these connoisseurs?

What are their class allegiances? And to what sex and race do they belong? Rejecting notions of objectivity along with those of impartiality, analytic philosophers on the British left have tended to stress that the notion of an aesthetic quality is itself an ideological construct. At its most extreme, this position is transmuted into one that insists that the very category of 'art' is itself oppressive of the working classes. Wittgensteinian notions of language-games and 'forms of life' have been used to buttress reductive claims which are greatly at odds with Wittgenstein's own comments on aesthetic worth.

Wittgenstein countered twentieth-century (German) notions of 'culture'; but without fundamentally disrupting the language of cultural and aesthetic value. By contrast, the British analytic philosopher, Roger Taylor, used Wittgensteinian conceptual analysis to argue that it is a mistake:

to say, as has been said in the history of aesthetics, that one's society's art is only the art of the upper classes, and that real art is something else... Art is nothing over and above what has been socially established as art. What is called art in our society is art regardless of what future societies call art and, therefore, the repositioning ... that our society might have got the art-list wrong assumes, wrongly, that there is something to get right or wrong. The only mistake that can be made is one of not knowing the conventions of the society (i.e. not knowing what society calls art).<sup>1</sup>

In this passage from *Art, An Enemy of the People* (1978), Taylor is implicitly attacking Marx's own notion of aesthetic worth. For Marx (along with most continental Marxists) believed that aesthetic taste can itself be subject to revolution; that there is more to artistic appreciation than the consensus of a majority or an élite; that, indeed, revolutionising attitudes to art can itself be an important instrument of social change. For Marx all art was very far from always being an 'enemy of the people'. Taylor distances himself from Marxism. But his polemic is significant, for it demonstrates neatly how the empiricist and analytic approach that is characteristic of British philosophy can so easily reduce all questions of artistic value to ones about the sociology of taste. More-Marxist-than-Marx, all notions of artistic progress are

analogously flattened into a polemic about the need to sweep away the very category of art itself.

It seems to me that philosophers working within this British tradition must bear part of the responsibility for the fact that in English-speaking cultures the question of what might or might not be a part of a radical aesthetic has been rather a side issue in leftist politics. Thus, in post-war Britain philosophical aesthetics increasingly became an area left open to the traditionalists: to right-wing thinkers, such as Roger Scruton, or to those who saw themselves as apolitical – but who did nothing to disturb the political *status quo*.<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton's recent book, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, reveals that such a position is, at last, changing. In ways that often irritate – but which are nevertheless important as indicators of a social trend – Eagleton has attempted to reposition his own left-wing attitudes towards 'the aesthetic' against a background of aesthetic theory that has reached down to the present from Kant, through German idealism, through Hegel, through Marx and the Frankfurt School.<sup>3</sup>

Given Eagleton's efforts, it might perhaps be considered otiose to spend time criticising Taylor's rather dated form of reductive aesthetics ... except for the fact that some of the most sophisticated and influential feminist theorists of the arts can still sound as crude as Taylor when the subject of aesthetic value comes into play. In this paper I will defend the traditional subject matter of aesthetics against those Marxist and socialist feminists who think that they need to take a position 'beyond' or counter to feminist aesthetics. But my defence of aesthetics will be undertaken with a radical end in view. For I believe that feminists need to work towards a fundamental revaluing of all aesthetic values. And I thus advocate a *revision* of notions of aesthetic worth that is at odds with the *excision* of such categories advocated, for example, by Griselda Pollock.

Pollock's importance to feminist art theory (including my own) can hardly be overstated. She makes theoretical distinctions far in advance of those of Taylor, and would scorn his use of Wittgensteinian techniques of linguistic analysis. Nevertheless, in her essay on feminist art histories and Marxism in *Vision and Difference*, Pollock adopts a stance towards 'Literary appreciation and art-history-as-appreciation' as dismissive as Taylor's attitude

to art itself. For her the concern 'with quality – i.e. positive and negative evaluations of artefacts' – condemns both these disciplines out of hand. Pointing out that art by women has historically been assessed as poor-quality art, Pollock remarks:

... feminists are easily tempted to respond by trying to assert that women's art is just as good as men's; it has merely to be judged by yet another set of criteria. But this only creates an alternative method of appreciation – another way of consuming art. They attribute to women's art other qualities, claiming that it expresses a feminine essence, or interpret it by saying it tends to a central 'core' type of imagery derived from the form of the female genitals and from female bodily experience. All too familiar formal psychologistic or stylistic criteria are marshalled to estimate women's art. The effect is to leave intact that very notion of evaluating art, and of course the normative standards by which it is done...

I am arguing that feminist art history has to reject all this evaluative criticism and stop merely juggling the aesthetic criteria for appreciating art. Instead it should concentrate on historical forms of explanation of women's artistic production.<sup>4</sup>

Although feminists have evaluated art-works and whole art-genres from either moral, prudential or straightforwardly political perspectives, within feminist art and literary history there has been no sustained attempt to develop a feminist theory of aesthetic value. Indeed, the whole topic has been neglected ... apart from a certain seepage from French theoreticians whose projects are often equated with 'feminist aesthetics'. This conflation is (rightly) one of the targets of Rita Felski's attack in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, since the most influential of these writers (Kristeva and Cixous) are concerned with describing a *féminin* attitude which has more to do with culturally constructed notions of 'the feminine' than with being either female or feminist.<sup>5</sup> Thus Cixous notes that, in the past, it was more likely to be male authors than female authors whose works fall into the approved category of the *féminin*.<sup>6</sup>

Luce Irigaray, whose work can be more sensibly read as working towards a feminist aesthetics, has been less influential. Too easily heard as a philosophical essentialist, her project of speaking *as a woman* has to be understood in terms of her rejection of such philosophical 'masters' as Plato, Kant, Freud and Derrida.<sup>7</sup> But in English language cultures – cut off from the philosophical traditions out of which Irigaray emerges – the notion that an aesthetic evaluation might be feminist (and not be simply a sociological report or a moral or political judgement) is found somewhat baffling. Thus in the above-quoted passage Pollock presents the feminist aesthetician with a false dichotomy: she must *either* eschew all aesthetic value judgements, *or* lapse into essentialism and formalism.

But why must any feminist revaluation of the notion of aesthetic value treat female bodies and experience in a biologicistic way and/or adopt the old values of patriarchal art? Why does Felski (illegitimately) entitle her (legitimate) attack on essentialist and formalistic tendencies in feminist literary criticism *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*? Why has 'aesthetics' become a dirty word to those on the left in English-language cultures? Radical responses appear to have been based on non-radical readings of the history of philosophy. There are other ways of understanding that history which will help us begin to disentangle those elements of past aesthetics which need to be preserved, and those which must be either abandoned or transformed for the purposes of a feminist aesthetics.

In its original (eighteenth-century) meaning, the subject-matter of aesthetics was the 'science of the senses'. The word 'aesthetics' comes to us from the German theorists (particularly Baumgarten and – most influentially – Immanuel Kant), rather than from empiricists like Hume who did not believe a 'science of taste' was possible. The German inventors of this branch of philosophy were concerned to discover how it might be possible to reach universal conclusions (valid for all persons) on the basis of individual, immediate (= passive and unconceptualised) sense experience. I think the hostility that feminists (and Marxists) often feel towards the notion of aesthetic evaluation comes, in part, from a confusion of 'aesthetics' with 'aestheticism'. But it is only contingently – via the Kantian system – that aesthetics became allied with an aestheticist attitude towards the world.

As Kant explains in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), a purely aesthetic judgement has eight characteristics. Firstly, it is made up from feelings of pleasure and pain. Secondly, it is immediate. In other words, although it is possible to rationalise aesthetic judgements after the fact, the judgements themselves are not based on a reasoning process. Thirdly, such a judgement is particular; it involves an individual experiencing subject responding to a unique object. Fourthly, the judgement is non-conceptual. Aesthetic response is said to be imaginative, and not based on the understanding of rules. Fifthly, aesthetic judgements are subjective – despite the fact that they also appear to have universal validity, and to apply not only to oneself, but to all experiencing human subjects.

According to Kant – and this is the sixth point – this universality is possible because the purely aesthetic response abstracts from the merely contingent features of the experience (from that which is historically variable and accidental). The purely aesthetic response transcends all emotion and all ‘charm’ or ‘attraction’ exerted by the object on the observer. Indeed, in its purest form even the existence of the object was seen as irrelevant to the aesthetic attitude. There could be no question of taking into account the object’s use-value or its material value. Kant calls this transcendent attitude ‘disinterested’.<sup>8</sup>

The seventh point is that for Kant it is the ‘formal’ features of the object that provide the focus of the aesthetic attitude. And, as always in Kant, form – that which makes a thing what it is and not something else – is explicated in terms of the space-time characteristics of the world. These characteristics are not straightforwardly ‘out there’, but are read onto the world by man’s productive imagination. Finally, as an eighth point, it should be pointed out that for Kant the purest kind of aesthetic response – the pleasure in the ‘beautiful’ – is based on a ‘disinterested’ appreciation of the harmony that is implicit in the form of an object. It is a response to that which makes an object a whole and not simply a multiplicity of parts. But since form is itself a product of the human imagination, what man is in effect taking pleasure in is the mind’s power over nature.

I should add as an important addendum to this that Kant also registers that there are other less pure forms of aesthetic pleasure. His key example

is that of the ‘sublime’, which involves a response to the terrifying (to gaunt mountains, thunder, storm-ridden seas, earthquakes, etc.). Here the pleasure comes from the overcoming of threat and of pain: of registering that the world is constructed by the imagination as an unknowable infinity which, at any moment, threatens to overwhelm the ego and reveal to the self its limits. But since the sublime involves registering this threat and transcending this threat, the enjoyment of the sublime is itself also an enjoyment of power over nature.

From a feminist point of view there are many aspects of Kant’s analysis that require criticism, since the ties that Kant makes between aesthetic pleasure and power are gendered through and through.<sup>9</sup> But it is, I believe, his notion of a ‘disinterested’ withdrawal from all material and use-value that has done most to bring the notion of the aesthetic into disrepute. For, during the nineteenth century, the aesthetic movement developed this notion of Kant’s to an extreme. The aesthetic was equated with a particular attitude of mind: with a blanking out of moral, social and political considerations ... and with an indifference to bodily dictates and needs. But disinterest is not integral to the notion of the aesthetic in its original meaning of a ‘science of taste’, and is a mode of artistic evaluation that feminists can and must revise and resist. For it by no means follows that to deny that aesthetic judgements are disinterested is to deny that there are no evaluative standards that can be developed to discriminate between adequate and inadequate responses to art-works ... or good and bad art-works.

Aesthetic evaluation comes in many forms. There is, for example, the type of evaluation that I analysed in *Gender and Genius*: that of deciding which artists deserve to be counted ‘great’, ‘important’ or even ‘geniuses’. I argued there that present-day women artists will suffer unless we recognise how gendered the standards are that are used to determine which artists are ‘great’, and unless feminists develop some alternative standards for aesthetic discrimination. Since these ideas have been developed much more fully elsewhere, I want here to focus on other, more pervasive, modes of aesthetic evaluation, starting with the evaluative element that is built into the *description* of particular qualities of an art-work. Thus, claims about an art-work’s ‘authenticity’, ‘originality’, ‘delicacy’, ‘forcefulness’ or ‘subtlety’

are not purely 'factual' statements that can be straightforwardly verified or falsified. All these terms fuse factual and descriptive elements in ways that make interpretation – and even apparently neutral descriptions – evaluative through and through.

There is, of course, *some* descriptive element in the use of a word like 'authentic'. To say that a blues song is authentic is not simply to say that one approves of it or that other people approve of it. 'Authenticity' is not just a quality in a musical composition that can be heard in an immediate way by a listener with suitably trained ears – although it is of course true that this is a judgement that is often made fairly instantaneously. 'Authenticity' involves situating the musical composition or performance in terms of a variety of *traditions* which are themselves evaluated as expressions of uncontrived emotion and/or character. We are dealing here with a highly complex value judgement of an aesthetic type which involves reference to standards; and I would thus reject Kant's notion that aesthetic judgements must be 'immediate', must abstract from all sensual appeal, and concentrate (in an utterly 'disinterested' way) on the 'form' of an object.

Since I accept neither 'immediacy' nor 'disinterestedness' as integral aspects of aesthetic judgement, it might be felt that I have moved so far away from traditional notions of 'aesthetic value' as to make my own position anti-aesthetical. But I would resist such a conclusion. Indeed, I would wish to go so far as to say that there is no way of escaping the necessity of judging aesthetically, and that there is no value-neutral critical space from which feminists can speak. Even to give priority to political, ethical or utilitarian value judgements over aesthetic judgements is, in effect, to opt for a particular variety of aesthetic value.

For me aesthetic evaluation takes place in the context of certain evoked *traditions* which bring along with them *standards* for discriminating particular qualities and features of art objects. I certainly would not want to move back to a form of pre-Kantian empiricism in which judgements of taste are simply represented as passive responses to pre-given 'objective' qualities which cause either like or dislike ... and in which the only role for the artistic critic would be to either discover or refine the social consensus. This is because to evaluate a painting favourably is not simply to say that one likes

it, that others like it, or that an élite of critics like it. An evaluation is not a report (either about external properties or about the state of mind of the observer). There is no contradiction in English in saying, 'I think Bacon is a great painter of the nude, but I can't stand him.'

To evaluate is not to describe what one *does* like or think, but what one *ought* to like or think. It is to set up an ideal observer as a standard of comparison; against which one's own (and others') likes and dislikes are to be judged. Sociologists of taste who seek to establish an equivalence between aesthetic judgements and records of social consensus have to refuse this crucial distinction between the ideal and the real. Hence Pierre Bourdieu's complaint that Kant's *Critique of Judgement* remains grammatically locked 'in the register of *Sollen*, "ought"'.<sup>10</sup> In his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), Bourdieu uses questionnaire techniques in an attempt to reduce Kantian aesthetic preferences to factual claims about the attitudes and judgements of the French high-bourgeoisie.

Aesthetic judgements are not expressions of like or dislike by actual, historical individuals. They are expressions of approval or disapproval by *ideal* individuals by reference to standards derived from *traditions* (which are not simply there as 'historical givens', but which have to be constructed by the observers). Feminist art and literary critics have shown that there are traditions of female art that run alongside (and between) the dominant traditions of art selected by the high-bourgeoisie. These matrilineal lines of influence and pattern need to be made visible, so that productions by women can be made more comprehensible and be better assessed by 'ideal observers' who judge the art-work in viewing conditions that are as-near-as-possible ideal, and in terms of a range of knowledge, experience, sensitivity and emotion that are appropriate for the art-work under observation. It is against these norms that all one's responses to the art-work have to be judged.

I am not claiming that these ideal observers actually exist, nor that for all art there is only one ideal observer (with only one range of experience, of sensitivity, of emotions and knowledge). It seems highly implausible to suppose that the ideal observer of a building by Le Corbusier would require the same qualities of mind and of knowledge as the ideal observer of a

portrait by Angelica Kauffman. Whether each art-work has only *one* ideal observer (i.e. whether aesthetic evaluations are universals) is a matter for debate. Personally, I would want to say that there is more than one valid response to each art-work (which is not to say, of course, that all responses are equally valid). But, as a feminist, I would also want to say that my ideal observers are not 'gentlemanly connoisseurs'. Instead, my own ideal posits observers with experiences and life-histories that have led them to empathise with art produced at the margins, and in opposition to the prevailing rhetorics of exclusion. An engagement with feminist theory and practice might produce such an openness of response; but so, too, might poverty or an involvement with the issues of 'black' and 'third-world' peoples.

There is also no reason whatsoever why an 'ideal' observer should be theorised in a Kantian fashion as transcending or lacking emotion or sexual appetite – or as solely rational. To make such moves would be to downgrade matter, emotionality and the 'feminine' in ways that require a feminist analysis and a feminist critique. But neither, I would wish to insist, can a feminist aesthetics be simply equated with a reversal of the old hierarchies that placed (masculine) form and rationality over (feminine) emotion and matter. I haven't time to provide a full critique of such notions here; I would simply point to the arguments in *Gender and Genius* where I show that, in the field of aesthetics, 'feminine' characteristics were long ago appropriated by male artists in ways that disadvantaged female artists in the history of culture.

I can't close this paper, however, without mentioning a further way in which evaluation creeps into the most apparently value-neutral descriptions of art; and that is via the notion of an 'Artist'. Gombrich opened his best-seller, *The Story of Art*, by suggesting that there is really no such thing as 'Art', only a series of artists. Against him I argue that there is really no such thing as an artist, only a series of art-works that critics hold together via the notion of an *oeuvre*. Not everything that is produced by those working in the arts gets counted into an *oeuvre*. Sketches for paintings sometimes count; but graffiti, doodles and marginalia are usually excluded. And so is the entire output of some individuals whose work is explained in terms of certain already-established traditions: 'Schools', 'Circles',

'Tendencies' or 'Movements' or 'Genres'. For the concept of an *oeuvre* is itself an evaluative category which looks to the notion of an individual's life, development and maturation to explicate the phenomenon of *unity through change*.

It is this notion of unity through change which we need to focus on to understand this difficult notion of an *oeuvre*. For an artist to have an *oeuvre* implies that there is some shape to his life, and that there are historical, geographical and social explications that can explain why this individual remains the same individual despite the myriad changes, pieces and contradictions which mark his or her work. An artist who is not credited with an *oeuvre* is one whose art-works have been treated in isolation (not as fragments of a fully individual, psychically rich self), or whose art-works have been treated as the product of non-individual collectives. It is not that an *oeuvre* is not located in terms of tradition, but that the *oeuvre* is considered as non-reducible to the traditions which the artist adapted or employed. Indeed, the great artist is precisely the one who is seen to mark the tradition in ways that determine the boundary between the old and the new. In Kant's famous phrase: 'The genius gives the rule to art.'

There have been sex-differential erasures from the history of the arts. The *oeuvres* of women artists and authors have disintegrated, since they have been seen to lack form: that which shapes matter, binds the accidents together into a unity, and makes a thing what it is and not something else. Women's works have been scattered and dispersed to a much greater extent than those of (white) males. The concept '*oeuvre*' has been used in gender-discriminatory ways. Nor is this simply because of the material disadvantages under which women produced their art. Inherent in the notion of an *oeuvre* – and hence built into the notion of an 'artist' – is a value judgement: a notion of a significant, important or (at least) interesting expression of a fully-human self. But since our ways of judging human maturation take the male personality as both norm and ideal, women have had to struggle to get their art-works interpreted in such generous ways.

As a philosopher I will not be happy until feminist critics register the centrality of aesthetic value judgements at every level of discussion and response to cultural production. For I see it as an urgent task to work out

ways of theorising aesthetic value so as to benefit women in the arts. But as a feminist I will not be happy until philosophers recognise the deep level at which aesthetic value judgements are gendered. Amongst the humanities subjects in Britain philosophy has been perhaps the slowest to open itself up to feminist transformations; and of the various fields of feminist philosophy in other English-language cultures, feminist aesthetics is amongst the least developed. But feminist philosophers have an important role to play in exposing the many ways in which gender issues disturb and pervert what in our culture gets categorised as 'Art' and who gets seen as 'an Artist'.

My own task then as both a philosopher and a feminist is to reform our notion of 'aesthetic value' in such a way as to benefit women. And that means that I am fundamentally opposed to Roger Taylor's idea that all art is an enemy of the people; to Griselda Pollock's claim that feminists must reject all forms of aesthetic value; and to any suggestion that the way ahead lies 'beyond' feminist aesthetics. As both a feminist and a philosopher I am, therefore, not ashamed to situate myself in a tradition of theorising the arts that reaches back to Immanuel Kant. Indeed, I believe that this is what must be done if we are to discover how feminists can (collectively) transform our notion of aesthetic value.

Obviously, this is a large task; and it is not one that any one person can do alone – especially since we lack most of the basic historical scholarship that would reveal gender bias in the history of our aesthetic vocabulary. Terms like 'universal', 'rational', 'abstract', 'form', 'structure', 'matter', 'organic', 'natural', 'functional', 'imaginative', 'beautiful', 'sublime' are commonly used in art criticism; but all require a feminist analysis of the type that I have elsewhere supplied for 'genius'. And so do such apparently innocuous terms as 'oeuvre'. I am therefore glad to have had a chance to signal the scale of the tasks ahead. Feminist aesthetics must fracture the ideal of one universal, historically-timeless canon of 'great art' discoverable by any 'disinterested' observer ... and must also resist the rhetoric of one universally constant, unchanging 'feminine essence' governing art by women. But holding these resistances in tandem is not contradictory. To assert both these things together does not mean that we must conclude that feminist aesthetics cannot exist.

## Notes

1. Roger L. Taylor, *Art, An Enemy of the People* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester, 1978), pp. 49–50.
2. Roger Scruton's *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Methuen, 1974) ends with the phrase 'ethics and aesthetics are one'. But the space that Scruton thus makes for a political dimension in aesthetics is not left-wing.
3. Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) is uneven in detail and conception. The book does, however, have merits – particularly in signalling a new openness to the aesthetic (that comes not just from Eagleton, but from the prestigious list of professional philosophers consulted by Eagleton, and acknowledged in his introduction).
4. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 26–27.
5. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989).
6. Hélène Cixous, *Writing Differences: Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous*, ed. Susan Sellers (Open University Press, 1988), p. 25. For more on this topic see my *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989; Indiana University Press, 1990).
7. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990) usefully defends Irigaray from such a reading. Fuss and Whitford (whose *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* and *Irigaray Reader* will be appearing shortly) have persuaded me that I should have placed more emphasis in *Gender and Genius* on the differences between Irigaray's position and those of Cixous and Kristeva.
8. This is where Kant's mature position in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) diverges from that of his early essay 'Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime' (1764). In the early work all beauty has a fundamental grounding in attraction (especially sexual attraction), and women are the paradigm examples of the beautiful. In the late work women are still positioned as beautiful. But the link is much more problematical, since an appreciation of them as sexual objects has to transcend all charm and sexual appeal.
9. *Gender and Genius* begins this task. But there I concentrated primarily on the continuities, rather than on the differences, between Kant's early and late positions: i.e. that in both women are excluded from the production and pleasures of the sublime.
10. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 488.