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## Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?

by Silvia Bovenschen\*

*This article opens up a new area of concern to New German Critique and it provides the starting point for a discussion which will be continued in subsequent issues. We are in fact planning an issue centering around feminism which should appear sometime next year.*

**Queen Victoria (1860):** *It is a matter of great concern to the queen to call upon every woman who can speak and write to put an end to this scandalous women's rights nonsense and all the related abominations which the regrettably weak sex, forgetting all sense of propriety, has fallen victim to.*

**Rahel Varnhagen:** *I am as unique as the greatest figures on this earth. The greatest artist, philosopher or poet is not above me. . .*

### 1. 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 upon closer examination, it is the tone and the platitudinous character of the lament that make 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.

Lately though, the pitch has become more shrill, and lamentation has turned into accusation. Since there is no reliable authority guaranteeing justice, women are leaving the wailing wall.

\* First published in German in *Aesthetik und Kommunikation*, 25 (September 1976).

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 reexamine its traditional assessments once again, if only for the reason that we lack a viable conceptual basis to work from.

**Excerpt from a conversation between Anna Louise Karsch ("Die Karschin"), called Sappho of Züllichau, and Frederick the Great, recorded in her own letter to Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim, August 15, 1763<sup>1</sup>:**

*Are you the poetess?*

*—Yes, Your Majesty! I am called thus!*

*You come from Silesia, do you not?*

*—Yes, Your Majesty!*

*Who was your father?*

*—He was a brewer from Schweidnitz, near the Grünberg vineyards.*

*But where were you born?*

*—On a dairy farm, like the one Horace had.*

*It is said that you never had instruction.*

*—Never, Your Majesty! My upbringing was of the worst sort!*

*But who helped you to become a poetess?*

*—Nature, and Your Majesty's victories.*

*But who taught you the rules?*

*—I know of no rules!*

*No rules? That is impossible! You must know the meter!*

*—Yes, Your Majesty! But I follow the meter from sound, and I know of no name for it.*

*But then how do you manage with language, if you never learned it?*

*—I have rather good control over my mother tongue!*

*I believe that, in terms of nuance, but what about the grammar?*

1. *Frauen in der Goethezeit* (Stuttgart, 1960 ff.).

—With regard to that, I can assure Your Majesty that I make only small mistakes!

But one should make no mistakes at all! (He smiles) What do you read, then?

—Plutarch's Lives!

Surely poetry as well?

—Yes, Your Majesty! Sometimes poetry as well. Gellert, Haller, Kleist, Uz and all of our German authors!

But do you not read the ancient poets as well?

—Unfortunately, I do not know the language of the ancients!

But there are translations!

—I have read a few songs of Homer, translated by Bodmer, and Lange's Horace.

So, Horace! Do you have a husband as well?

—Yes, Your Majesty! But he deserted your ranks, he is wandering around Poland, he wants to marry again and is asking for a divorce, which I will grant him, since he does not support me!

Do you have children from him?

—A daughter!

Is she beautiful?

—So-so, Your Majesty! She did not have a beautiful mother!

But this mother was once beautiful!

—I most humbly beg your pardon! She was never beautiful! Nature forgot about her exterior!

Then how do you live?

—Oh, Your Majesty! Very badly! I cannot get a house in Berlin, and to give Your Majesty an idea of my apartment, I must ask you to imagine a chamber in the Paris Bastille! . . .

How do you live?

—Gifts from my friends! . . .

When you put poems in print, what do you receive for a page?

—Not much, Your Majesty! I had eight poems printed in honor of your triumphs.

And what did you receive?

—Only 20 Taler!

Twenty Taler? In truth! One cannot live on that. . . .

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>2</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 did not only predominate 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>3</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>4</sup> We know today, though only because we bothered to look into the

2. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York, 1970), p. 161.

3. George Sand, *Meine Lebensbeichte* (Berlin-Leipzig, no date), p. 98.

4. Karl Scheffler, *Die Frau und die Kunst* (Berlin, 1908), p. 29.

matter ourselves, that it would not be difficult for us to prove that such statements are historically incorrect. But that is only a minor point here. The quotation is from Karl Scheffler (*Die Frau und die Kunst*, 1908), a sexologist who, by means of such value judgments and sexist categorizations, assured himself of the unqualified approval of male professionals and, alas, occasionally even of female professionals. Franziska zu Reventlow, recently honored as heroine in the *Frauenkalender* and author of dubiously worthwhile novels, comes to the same conclusions in an enraged pamphlet attacking feminism (“*Viragines oder Hetären?*”). She, too, finds female genius a contradiction in terms; she, too, does not credit women with any real creative accomplishments—they can excel only as performers on stage. But “play-acting is not actually productive art, it is only a matter of adaptation, of putting oneself into the role, of receptivity. We have great actresses and great dancers, but no notable female composers or dramatists.”<sup>5</sup> And yet, *this* woman wrote literature. She was even published. What are the processes at work here? How great must the alienation be, either from one’s own metier or, as it were, from one’s own sexual identity, to cause a female artist to make statements containing such questionable arguments against her own case? But this bizarre contradiction did not exist merely in her mind, pity though it was that she could not recognize it. It was, rather, an objective moment in all of women’s art. All women artists faced the brutal choice of living either for their art (an insecure, joyful and sorrowful perspective) or reduced to their sex alone (a secure, sorrowful perspective). Only a very few possessed the sovereignty necessary to avoid that choice and the expectations associated with it.

The anti-feminist aspect of statements such as those by Reventlow and Scheffler is apparent. Women should stop getting upset about that. But more importantly, even if such statements constantly confuse cause and effect, they *do* contain kernels of truth. Read against the grain, contrary to their intended meaning, such explications can also give us an unobscured picture. 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. The number of art theoreticians who have worked this ground over is legion, and their line of argument, reduced to its banal foundation, reads: Women are different, and one manifestation of this natural (nota bene!) difference is that they are incapable of art. The reference to a natural inadequacy was later replaced by the term “deficit,” borrowed from banking jargon. Critics have always regarded the female producers of literature,

5. Franziska zu Reventlow, “*Viragines oder Hetären?*” *Zürcher Diskussionen* (1899).

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. (Valie Export, in a highly informative report, once began a very abbreviated compilation of women's place in the history of art. I liked it particularly because she took the stance of "well, this is just for starters, just what comes to mind immediately, but if we were to really start searching. . . ."<sup>6</sup>)

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.)

The pitiful little chapter that the cultural historian devotes to the handful of women writers and painters, not to mention women composers, alongside his exaggerated obeisances to the reigning men in art, serves as argument enough for conservatives. This ratio is all the evidence they need, for art cannot be women's metier if they are hardly ever represented. An argument based on such evidence is sheer infamy; it points an accusing finger at the just barely kindled spark of feminine artistic effort by means of a tautological reasoning process: Women's absence from the hallowed chambers to which they were denied entry is now presented as evidence of their extraordinary lack of ability. The recourse to nature for the substantiation of uniquely "sexual" characteristics postulated *a priori* certitude and guaranteed agreement.

These stale misogynous jokes do not work any longer. The new women's movement has seen to that. But now there is a threat from the other front: the theoretician of equality. He came into the picture early on. In Germany, he made his first appearance during the Enlightenment, in the person of von Hippel,<sup>7</sup> who in the 18th century already pointed out the unequal access to sectors of the bourgeois public sphere afforded to men and women. We should laud him posthumously for his courage and insight.

In the meantime the picture has changed. Today the line of argument empha-

6. Valie Export in *Feminismus: Kunst & Kreativität*, ed. Valie Export (Vienna, 1975).

7. Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, "Ueber die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber," *Sämtliche Werke*, 6 (Berlin, 1828).

sizing equality belongs to the repertoire of men in “progressive” circles. Cultural historians readily sacrifice the statistical aspect of frequency or rarity in favor of a well-intentioned reappraisal. Scientific thinking suddenly springs into action. The limitations of and impediments to women’s opportunities can now be explained sociologically. Such cultural and historical investigations are indeed essential, there is no doubt of that. But the sudden change of course is suspicious. To return to the threat mentioned above: cooptation, the desire to ignore and obscure differences—these are inherent in the claim that there are no longer men and women, but just thousands of human beings. Every woman has had countless experiences which render such contentions absurd. This kind of differentness is not something which can simply be conjured up or made to disappear depending on one’s momentary mood or situation. The new motto—“Women are not really different from men”—overlooks the thousands of years of patriarchal history and the disparate socialization processes. And, coming at a time when women have begun to discover their own capabilities and needs, to set their own goals, and to reappropriate their uniqueness, it comes as a strategy to undermine these efforts. But it is too late for all that. Okay, as far as I am concerned you are just as good as I am, says the husband to his wife when she comes home carrying the *Woman’s Handbook*. I prefer the reactionary type who uses the differences (to him, they are the shortcomings of women) to further his chauvinistic ends. Because he is more honest, I would rather have him than the pseudo-progressive conformist who pats you on the shoulder and reassures you that, were they only given a bit of support and encouragement, women could really do the same things as men. This he says in the hope that, since they can no longer be kept completely ignorant, women will 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? We shall come back to that later.

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>8</sup>:**

8. Chantal Akerman, interview with Claudia Aleman, in *Frauen und Film*, 7 (March, 1976).



*If women imitate men's battles they will become weaker and weaker. They must find new forms of struggle. This became evident in Hendave where women demonstrated against the death sentence in Spain. Some women shouted and clenched their fists, while others just hummed. They went "mmmmmm" 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 neatly separated and dominated the 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 Shulamith Firestone to the conclusion that "It would take a denial of all cultural tradition for women to produce even a true 'female' art."<sup>9</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

9. Firestone, *Dialectic of Sex*, p. 159.

experiences in the 20th 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 an 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. And are we even concerned with chronology? 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. Illuminating this side initially implies no more than reiterating the aforementioned state of affairs, namely, that women put their souls, their bodies and last but not least their heads on the block for men, thus enabling them to take off on their cultural aerobatics and to sink to their barbaric lows. 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 the 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, such as we find in Verena Stefan’s book *Häutungen* (Molting, 1975), is certainly a step in this direction.

**Lucy Lippard: Why a separate women's art?<sup>10</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>11</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 towards 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 over-articulated 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.

2. A digression on "feminine nature"

The "nature" of woman is a favorite topic in discussions like this, coming this time not from the male chauvinist front (they have become more cautious here), but rather, from within women's own ranks. According to this line of thought, the mere existence of a particular type of biological organization, irrespective of its historical development, constitutes a mythical power containing the sublation of inhuman relationships. (I, too, believe in women's mythical powers, but they have nothing to do with their wombs.)

Here the "masculine" argument is volleyed back, simply reversed and interpreted positively. "Deficits" can become opportunities, defeats can turn into victories. However, all this is not dependent upon the "posture"—the symbols—

10. Lucy Lippard, "Warum separierte Frauenkunst?", in *Feminismus: Kunst & Kreativität*.

11. Frieda Grafe, "Ein anderer Eindruck vom Begriff meines Körpers," in *Filmkritik* (March, 1976).

we assume, but rather upon the political-feminist process in which we find ourselves.

Neither inferiority nor superiority can be deduced from the biological make-up of a human being. Nevertheless, all kinds of things are constantly being “deduced.” As we know, biology has its societal side; we are made aware of this from the very first day of our lives. To this, then, we can no longer respond by mobilizing the innocence of our respective bodies *per se*. It has always been easy to degrade women as the weaker sex by postulating psycho-physical parallelism, i.e., the supposed physical weakness implies intellectual weakness. This argument still works today and is only *one* example of the idiotic assertion that the battle of the sexes will automatically resolve itself once economic equality in the realm of production and in the public sphere is achieved. Demands for equality no longer assure us of the inevitability of emancipation. On the other hand though, insight is equally impeded if one neglects the question of social constellations in which dissimilar biological make-up plays a part. It must be emphasized that both factors are inseparably interwoven. A particular type of biological organization will necessarily have a certain value attached to it—in the case of women, one of exploitation—and the interrelatedness of these two elements cannot be dissolved in favor of either one or the other.

Nonetheless, conscious identification with one’s sex paves the way for everything else. Even if we want to deny it and take the opposite course, it determines our actions and thoughts. We stand and walk differently, we do nearly everything differently. Perhaps this is the reason why most transvestites become mere caricatures of women. There is too much that remains stifled in us at an early age and becomes an immutable part of our biography.

Ideology and the apportioning of roles subsumed women under the category “primary nature.” This is what Simone de Beauvoir means when she says, “Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones.”<sup>12</sup> The biological make-up of women plays a different role, or more precisely, *only* the biological make-up of *women* plays a societal role. That of men disappears in a cloud of activity, technology and ritual. But a simple retreat into biology cannot be women’s aim. Aside from the fact that even the individual woman herself can no longer distinguish between her “primary” and her “secondary” nature, such a one-sided definition of female competence would bring us alarmingly close to

12. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1974), p. xviii.

reactionary ideologies of motherhood. We would be returning voluntarily to the cell.

**Simone de Beauvoir, in an interview in *Der Spiegel*<sup>13</sup>:**

*On the one hand, it is good that women are no longer ashamed of their bodies. . . . But we must not attach intrinsic importance to that, or think that the female body will give us a new vision of the world. That idea is silly and absurd. That would be tantamount to creating a counter-penis. Women who think that way fall back into the irrational, the mystical and the cosmic. They are playing men's games.*

Besides the one fact that women today have less difficulty accepting their bodies, what, then, are the positive elements that we can derive from this context?

Just recently another man, the philosopher Herbert Marcuse, gave us an answer. In this case we even become the carriers of revolution. Women's specificity is "subversive potential," according to Marcuse. This "subversive potential" consists of "realizing qualities which, all through the long history of patriarchal society, have been ascribed to women rather than men. Formulated as an antithesis to the dominant male characteristics, such feminine qualities would be receptivity, sensitivity, non-violence, tenderness, etc. . . . Feminine sensitivity could undermine the repressive rationality and work ethic of capitalism."<sup>14</sup> One question arises here, apparent to anyone with even a bit of linguistic sensitivity. How do the sexual attributes listed, such as "non-violence," stand in relation to the process of "undermining"? That just as an aside.

Although women have been able to distance themselves at least partially from the prevailing criteria of efficiency and achievement, this cannot mean that they therefore would neither possess, nor want to possess, any modes of productivity, rationality or—with regard to the extraordinary and ordinary violence they contend with daily—destructivity.

**Chantal Akerman again<sup>15</sup>:**

13. de Beauvoir, Interview with Alice Schwarzer, in *Der Spiegel* (April, 1976).

14. Herbert Marcuse, "Marxismus und Feminismus," in *Zeitmessungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1975), p. 13.

15. Akerman in *Frauen und Film*.

*Of course, you still hear "Oh, a woman did that," and "women are soft and sweet as honey." But when women concretize their modes of seeing, the result is very vehement, very violent. It is just that this violence manifests itself differently than it does with men. Women's violence is not commercial; it is beyond description.*

Receptivity versus productivity, sensitivity versus rationality, etc., etc. Such dualities traditionally associated with the polarity between the sexes cannot be obliterated by mere juxtaposition. If we insist upon differentiation it cannot be in the sense of mere inversion.

**Meret Oppenheim, upon awarding a prize for art<sup>16</sup>:**

*'Intellectual achievements among women seem so embarrassing.' For that reason, people repress and forget them as soon as possible. Ideas? Every really new idea is in fact an act of aggression. And aggression is a characteristic that is absolutely contradictory to the image of femininity which men carry around within themselves and which they project onto women.*

The dialectic that Marcuse relinquishes for his categorizations persists nonetheless within the individual qualities themselves. One such quality, supposedly always dominant in women's behavioral repertoire, is *Sanft-Mut* (gentleness).<sup>\*</sup> This is an inherently ambivalent quality. On the one hand, it is emblematic of female subjugation and bears the traces of longstanding submissiveness and passivity. On the other hand, it contains utopian moments and lends us an idea of human behavior beyond oppression, competition and compulsory achievement. At first glance, this appears as the promise of the future. However, since women were raised in and must live in a patriarchal world, since they must ensure their survival in it, their real existence must necessarily run counter to these possibilities. If, indeed, it is a positive manifestation of women's socialization to find that it results in a lesser degree of aggression (and this is something I am coming to doubt more and more), then women must learn to mobilize more aggression each and every day in order to be able to combat the constraints

16. Meret Oppenheim in *Feminismus: Kunst & Kreativität*.

\* Translator's note: The compound word "Sanftmut" generally means "gentleness." When taken literally, it means "gentle courage," or "the courage to be gentle" (sanft = gentle; mut = courage).

of patriarchal organizations, whether in the family, the career or, as in this context, the artistic realm. The issue here is one of developing new forms of productivity, rationality, and, if necessary (which it is) aggression. It is not a question of abandoning one aspect of the duality in favor of the other. The programmed thought patterns inherent in such dualities seem to me to be highly suspect, even if they are directed at a new goal, and even if in reality they may quite nearly correspond to societal types. The academic sciences soon find a slot in revolutionary theories for this new "potential" and new "quality" everyone is talking about. They formally absorb these concepts, integrate them into an archaic frame of reference and deal with them in abstractions and language that are already on the way to becoming traditional.

Even when debating the prevalent theories, as I notice now in writing this, certain linguistic structures prove difficult to avoid and continue to manifest themselves. I am disturbed by the formal problems that show up while I am writing, when I am, so to speak, in dialogue with myself. What about academic language? We have to wade through it, it seems. We can expect many accusations, most of which we can ignore, but the charge of ignorance is not one to which we should expose ourselves. The rejection of every theory and every academic legacy expresses abstract hostility and puritanical celibacy; it is nothing more than irrationality and politically questionable anti-intellectualism. But we must keep a close eye on ourselves at all times, we must be careful at all times. There is only a very fine line between committed criticism and academic conformism. The battle must be waged on every front. The analysis of linguistic structures, imagery, the forms and symbols of behavior and communication, is tough work which has hardly begun. If women are to succeed in freeing themselves from old patterns, in conquering new terrain and—to finally return to the subject at hand—in developing different aesthetic forms, they can do this only on the basis of their autonomy. Women's specific and unique experiences (so that knowledge can be experienced, not learned), rooted in their collective endeavors, are the preconditions for their success in any practical sense.

Schematically apportioning or redistributing "qualities" by merely inverting or redefining them does not seem to provide a particularly fruitful answer to the question of women's creative potential. Nonetheless, I felt that discussion of theoretical proposals such as these would be useful, for two reasons. First, as it occurred to me while reading the Marcuse article, we are dealing with examples of how language and abstraction serve to widen *the gap between the concept and the object* in a manner which engulfs every instance of experience. The object rebels against this. This relates to the question: *how can the specifically feminine modes of perception be communicated?* The answer here may actually be in the examples of female creativity which already exist (i.e., in women's

manner of looking at things, whereby I do not mean merely the aspect of visual perception suggested by the term), rather than in a premature program of “feminist aesthetics.”

And the second reason: in attempting to conceptualize female creativity, the old dualistic notion of the “natural” and the “artificial” is often evoked. If these concepts are taken in their trivial sense, then the principle of femininity is represented solely by the first. I already alluded to the supposed naturalness of women above, so here only a word in clarification: there is more behind the cosmetic industry than simply the idea of “natural beauty.”

Such formulations suggest evasiveness on our part, suggest renunciation of all that is artistic, refusal of any attempt to use the media for our own purposes, denial of any aesthetic transformation. The verbal debate about this topic suffers greatly from linguistic inadequacy, with the result that in fighting with words one often loses sight of the tangible referent. However, perhaps precisely because of these obvious difficulties, it would be an act of sheer ignorance for women to neglect the aesthetic activities constituting an interesting aspect of our reality.

Difficulties arise when the notion of beauty is attached to an empirical woman. Marilyn Monroe was at one and the same time artistic product, myth of femininity and victim of an inhuman culture industry. We cannot posthumously dissect her into one natural and one artificial woman, leaving one part of her to Norman Mailer and turning the other part, clothed in jeans, into the figurehead of Women’s Lib. The entire woman belongs to our side.

### 3. Digression II: On feminine beauty

Amazingly, it seems that even those images of femininity constructed by men or by the male art industry are turning against their creators in ever increasing numbers. Having become mere commonplace myths, they are stepping out of their molds, out of their literary or filmic contexts. I believe that their metamorphosis is not only the result of the new interpretation and effect they now have, due to the influence of the women’s movement. It is much more dependent upon the fact that an element of female resistance, if only a passive one, has always contributed to artistic production. Mario Praz, for one, set out to learn about the uncanny from the *Belles Dames sans Merci*.<sup>17</sup> Olympia, Lulu, Nana, the Salome and Judith figures of the *fin de siècle*, Marlene Dietrich. . . . One need not engage in interpretational acrobatics to recognize the subversive disturbances instigated by these dangerous, wild women of history. In his lecture on “Femininity,” Sigmund Freud said to his audience: “People have always

17. Mario Praz, *Liebe, Tod und Teufel: Die schwarze Romantik*, v. 1-3 (Munich, 1970).



pondered the riddle of femininity. [There follows here an insignificant passage from a Heine poem, S.B.] Those of you who are men will not have been spared this pondering either. It is not expected of the women among you, for you yourselves are the riddle."<sup>18</sup> The possibility that women might experience and perceive femininity differently than men was often seen as a way of questioning, of posing an indirect threat to masculine art. Men's failure to comprehend this riddle was not, however, shown as their shortcoming. Instead, it was projected back onto women, seen as the eternal feminine mystique. But Oedipus did not solve the riddle of the Sphinx (that is only men's wishful thinking), though any woman could have. If women had been the ones to stand and stare in like amazement at the riddles of art—especially the one in which the feminine image is supposed to convey the idea of beauty, the one in which the riddle has been shoved off onto women—they could only have marveled at the extent to which they had become a secret about which they themselves knew nothing. Treatises like those by Walter Pater and d'Annunzio on the smile of the Mona Lisa yield information about the riddle, abysses and revelations which they find crystallized in the image of woman. Of course, this pursuit was not concerned with empirical women but rather, for the most part, with pictures of women as created by male artists. It is possible that the more sensitive artists, those who passed the riddle along to their contemporaries and followers, were already operating on the assumption that they would never be able to comprehend fully the truth about femininity. Instead, they limited themselves to dealing with only *that* part of "universal" woman that was accessible to their individual dispositions, their sex and their sensory faculties. Through the centuries, culturally diverse standards of beauty have repeatedly reestablished the status of the female body as object. On the other hand, adoration of masculine beauty, or of beauty as manifested in the male body, as we see with Michelangelo, was more rare and often clouded by the aura of homosexual desire. And an aesthetic theory measured in terms of the masculine model, such as Winckelmann's, only purports to glorify an ideal purged of such longings, even if generations of educators tried to make us believe otherwise.

**Dorothy Richardson, in *Dawn's Left Hand*<sup>19</sup>:**

*She looked at Amabel through his eyes. And saw everything in her escape them. Her poses and mannerisms, that were second nature, he would amusedly accept as so many biological contrivances. And if he*

18. Sigmund Freud, "Die Weiblichkeit," in *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, Studienausgabe, v. 1, p. 545.

19. Richardson, *Dawn's Left Hand* (London, 1931), p. 204f.

*thought her "pretty"—sacrilege, even in thought, to apply to Amabel this belittling expression that at this moment I see as part of his deliberate refusal to take any kind of womanhood seriously and is not condoned by his protesting that neither does he take himself seriously—would play up to her as he does, as I have seen him do, with women who "exploit" themselves; subtly conveying at the same time, to the simple female he saw behind the manoeuvres, that he knew what she was about and that she was doing it rather well. But perhaps he would not even think her pretty.*

Women's identification with the aesthetic objectification of femininity has traditionally been misplaced. Only when the artistic figures embodying the principle of femininity broke away from the traditional patterns of representation and managed to avoid the usual clichés, could there be any real identification. Barring this, identification on the part of women could take place only via a complicated process of transference. The woman could either betray her sex and identify with the masculine point of view, or, in a state of accepted passivity, she could be masochistic/narcissistic and identify with the object of the masculine representation.

Causing women to conform mindlessly to the masculine image of them is not, however, the only way in which men have helped determine women's image of themselves. This is because aspects of true femininity, instances of female resistance and uniqueness—though often in disguised form—have always been contained in the artistic product. These instances then appeared as indicators of the mysterious and puzzling nature of women.

Women no longer model their behavior and appearance after such stereotypes. Those times are past. BB's pout is no longer imitated. Nevertheless, the abstract negation of such standards of beauty (whether in the fine arts, in literature, film or even advertising) is still bound up with these very standards, just as Rosenkranz' "Aesthetic of Ugliness" needed the idealistic conception of beauty as its counterpart. It is too overt and contrived to find beautiful *precisely* what is abhorred by conventional standards of beauty. Yet, if I am not mistaken, this very attitude reflects the feeling of many women today. Much is lost by thinking this way. The problem is further complicated when we find that artistic representations of femininity still serve as vehicles for a general debate about definitions of beauty. This means that we have to contend with continual cross-overs from the artistic sphere to that of everyday life. Here again, merely reversing the values would be too superficial and contrived as to render a "feminist conception of beauty." This kind of show of power requires a lot of effort, but does not bring many results.

Rather than limiting ourselves in this way, we could expand our horizons toward genuinely feminist interpretations of female figures, like the attempts of some painters and action artists today. Female beauty can be won back from the celebration of consumerism by exploding the framework of masculine objectification and fetishization of specific parts of the body, or the shape of noses. (We can then decide whether to still call this beauty, or whether to find a new word for it.) Here we would not be merely inverting values, since body fetishism was never women's doing. Or has it ever been reported that sexologists discussed the collecting of men's shoes or underwear? In America (!) they have multi-colored, edible women's underpants, in assorted flavors.

For a long time—and I'm speaking now of our everyday life once again—women regarded their bodies in anticipation of masculine fetishization, and allowed this to become the criterion for their own acceptability. The danger is that this criterion still exists, but now it has become the standard for rejecting anything about the female figure that was once the object of male esteem. Sacrifice at the male altar continues.

Every century, within the framework of its particular standards of beauty, had its own favorite bosom and rear, so it is nearly impossible not to conform to one cliché or another. Especially in this regard, one finds little difference between the depictions by "great artists," which have become frozen as norms, and the trivial dictates of taste handed down by the culture industry. But we should not underestimate the power of these beauty requirements, whether they are derived from art or from the petty fashion of the day. "Would he still love me if I weren't beautiful?" asks the heroine in every eighth Hollywood flick, a question which has never been heard coming from a male actor pondering his relationship with a woman. This question is one well suited in making women even more insecure, in that it sets them to wondering—usually unhappily—about whether or not they even possess the prerequisite for asking the question, namely beauty. Women's rage is absolutely justified. Those are the norms which have made our growing old intolerable and have caused the rift between us. It is time to disregard them completely, time to abstain from even their negative acknowledgment. This requires that women refrain from constructing their own set of trivial aesthetic norms, such as "jeans are allowed but skirts are suspicious," "red hair is fine but red fingernails don't make it," "do I look too masculine or too feminine?" Setting up standards such as these, in negative reaction to masculine beauty fantasies, would merely limit our freedom once again.

#### 4. The myth reflecting upon itself. Marlene Dietrich's recent appearances

A discussion I recently had in a women's group left an impression on me. Not long before, Marlene Dietrich, who is not exactly young anymore, was the solo

performer in a gala television special in London. An artistic product came on stage, every movement perfected, every gesture precisely rehearsed, premeditated, every facial expression calculated for aesthetic effect. Every step, every movement of her head or hands—all these were spare, artificial. Added up, the details gave the impression that decades of experience lead to precision. Although she cannot really sing, the audience went wild over the familiar old songs. In performance she was totally cool, faintly ironic, and even when she was portraying emotion everything was staged, she made no attempt to make the emotion appear genuine. When she sings—actually it is more like talking than singing—she slurs, softens the refrains, but even this is not fortuitous. The pose is intentional, it says, you know this one already, I know you will be pleased if I sing it. . . . And in the dialogue in between songs, familiar kitsch, reminiscences, the performer's stage biography blends with the biographies of the older members of the audience. For the younger ones it is already a legend. Behind her is an early picture of herself, only the head. Her face is older now, but even this change seems not so much the result of the biological aging process; it seems much more something artificially arranged, a sort of displacement intended to signify historical distance. And her body is just as artificial, absolutely smooth as though encased in some unfamiliar fabric—we are watching a woman demonstrate the representation of a woman's body.

But back to the discussion. I was told it was all terribly sad, this woman dared not grow old, surely she had had her face lifted, a fine example of all the things women have let people do to them. . . , the same old game. I agree, it is the same old game, but the rules have changed. The myth appears on stage and consciously demonstrates itself as myth. Just like in the zoo: the monkey is suddenly the observer, and the people are the ones standing and staring out from behind bars. All this has little to do with the actual woman whose real name most people have forgotten. Who knows how she looks in the dressing room afterwards; who knows how we will look at her age. That is another world. But the artistic figure Marlene Dietrich is interesting if for no other reason than because she is one of the few female performers who acts by way of intellectual understatement and who managed to become a myth despite her subtle disdain for men. Now she comes on stage once again and demonstrates the process that turned her into a myth, a process she now rises above. Even reactionary theories of art always credited women with ability in the performing arts. This is to a certain extent true, in that women, excluded from other opportunities, often used their bodies as vehicles for expressing their artistic impulses; they turned their bodies into artistic products. Many of them were destroyed in the process. But Marlene Dietrich, the cool one, triumphs. She alone controls the image to be projected. Whereas before an actress had to satisfy the expectations of the audience, now

the audience must conform to hers. The myth is on the receiving end and consumes the audience. She gazes down from the stage not once but twice, once as an image and once as an artist, as if to say okay, if this is how you want it. . . .

##### 5. The aesthetic and the feminist public spheres

"The women who wished to be taken for men in what they wrote were certainly common enough; and if they have given place to the women who wish to be taken for women the change is hardly for the better. . . ." <sup>20</sup> Virginia Woolf wrote this rather malevolent sentence in 1918, a time at which people in England were conducting heated arguments about the demands being made by the women's movement. The author did not entirely evade these feminist issues, even if her comments on this subject are pleasantly unorthodox. The quote contains an attack on the ignorance of formal problems in aesthetics—mistaking pamphleteering for literature—and raises the question of competence. Virginia Woolf's own works exemplify care and precision in dealing with linguistic material. She was an author who did not think that, by simply recalling her female sex, her experience or nature or whatever else would dictate instant art onto the page. Of course women possess the potential and the right to do anything. It is indeed idiotic that we must emphasize even these old concepts of natural rights with regard to women. But a stick figure is a far cry from a Sarah Schumann painting. The combination of artistic ability with "feminine" innovativeness is still a rare stroke of luck. Only the progress of feminism can make this happen more often and seem less exceptional, in all areas.

A feminine approach to art must include both aspects mentioned above. It cannot ignore the problems of what is aesthetically possible, the difficulties involved in working with artistic material, the matter of technique and of the intrinsic dynamics of various media, but neither can it ignore the question of the relationship between art and feminism.

Once before, it seemed as though a new age were dawning. Virginia Woolf: "But here, too, women are coming to be more independent of opinion. They are beginning to respect their own sense of values. And for this reason the subject matter of their novels begins to show certain changes. They are less interested, it would seem, in themselves; on the other hand, they are more interested in other women. . . . Women are beginning to explore their own sex, to write of women as women have never been written of before; for, of course, until very lately, women in literature were the creation of men."<sup>21</sup> . . . and once before, these

20. Virginia Woolf, "Women Novelists," in *Contemporary Writers* (London, 1965), p. 26.

21. Woolf, "Women and Fiction," in *Collected Essays*, vol. II (New York, 1967), p. 146.

literary expectations were dashed, bound up as they were with the development of a new feminine self-consciousness and the hopes engendered by the women's movement. Once before, female artists were thrown back upon themselves and forced to rely upon a male dominated public in order to get their works published or shown, in order to obtain even the slightest degree of recognition.

Thus far, I have found tangible instances of what might be termed female sensitivity towards writing (or towards painting, etc.) only in certain moments of female subversion, female imagination or formal constructs within various works. And I find these only when the specifics of feminine experience and perception determine the form that the work takes, not when some "feminine concern" has merely been tacked onto a traditional form. The question directed at a painter of why she did not portray women's demonstrations or activities in her paintings, is an objectively cynical and insulting one. Such a question reduces her work to the level of photo-journalism in weekly news magazines, something any man could do just the same. The feminine quality of a work ought not be determined solely by its subject matter.

The bridge linking the demands of the movement on the one hand with artistic activity and its concrete work with materials and media on the other is still very narrow. Thus, those women who are committed to both sets of demands face a terribly difficult situation. They are risking their fate to demonstrate that the gap *can* be bridged. Overcoming this opposition between feminist demands and artistic production is, even today, the special task faced by those women who dared to venture into artistic work and yet managed to avoid betraying their sex in the process, despite all the obstacles and resistance they met with. For them, the alternative of either "real artist" or "recorder of the movement's activities" can only seem a bad joke. It is risky to rely solely upon a public that is still in the formative stages of development—namely women—and that has not always proven itself capable of making aesthetic judgments. Yet one can expect perhaps even less from the established art public, for they demand even greater willingness to compromise. For a long time the reigning men in this sphere, the big shots, critics and producers, willingly believed that art was an exclusively male province. (In fact, they still believe that today—they simply no longer advertise the fact!) Recently though, out of sheer necessity, they have conceded that art is androgynous in nature. (But even this in no way means that they consider women's works to be on a par with men's; their concession to androgyny is only a smokescreen.) But they will declare war on any feminist art that sees itself as something other than merely one odd variation among others cropping up on the currently bleak artistic scene. If women view their art as something produced by women for women, men will fight it, if for no other reason than because their aesthetic yardstick is unable to measure a phenomenon

such as this. Patriarchal blinders cannot be taken off at whim.

#### 6. 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>22</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. These impulses could not be concretely realized, nor could they lead to an artificial desire to experiment.

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

22. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London, 1963), p. 88.

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 pre-conditions.

However, it can be proven that women succeeded in entering the artistic realm when they gained access to it via the adjoining “pre-aesthetic” realms. In the 18th 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. The letters of Caroline Schlegel are true masterpieces of mixed aesthetic form: wardrobe descriptions



alternate with philosophical discourses, gossip with literary quotations, allusions and criticism. 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.

"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 assumption 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.

Lucy Lippard<sup>23</sup>

*And yet, there can be no doubt that the realm of female experience is sociologically and biologically different from that of the male. . . .*

23. Lippard, in *Feminismus: Kunst & Kreativität*.

*Is feminine sensitivity best expressed by a particular fragmented form or through strict unity? In circles, oval blocks or through a striped, filigreed pattern? Through sensual surfaces or through a subtle sense of color? The images, the choice of theme, even the intentions behind the application of these forms or similar ones in video, film, dance—all these are merely superficial indicators of a more fundamental difference. I count myself among those who are convinced that this differentiation exists, and yet for every case that I can specify there are innumerable others that defy such specifications.*

There is no proof of a different (female) relationship to detail and generality, to motionlessness and movement, to rhythm and demeanor. At present, this is all still conjecture. 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>24</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 extreme, 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>25</sup>:**

*The self-satisfied, complacent, know-all condescendingness of their handling of their material. . . . The torment of all novels is*

24. Woolf, "Romance and the Heart," in *Contemporary Writers*, p. 124f.

25. Richardson, *Dawn's Left Hand*, p. 202f.

*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 has directed women's imagination along other lines, not to speak of women's responsibility for the biological and social reproduction of the species, as well as the economic, if they are working. 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. Art should become feminized, and women's participation (limited by men to their sensuality alone) would do it a lot of good. Perhaps then our male colleagues would not need to proclaim the death of art one year and recant the next. But that is only peripheral here.

It is also premature to revel in women's spontaneous activities, such as their parties, as if they represented a new, "vital" aesthetic, totally different from the aesthetic of objectified art products. (This would be analogous to the slogan of the student movement that art would henceforth take place in the streets.) Women will know how to resist the imprisonment of their imagination in the artistic ghetto, not because this fits into their "aesthetic program," but rather because, whereas terminology may fail, this imagination constitutes the movement itself.

The predisposition to feminine/sensual cognition and perception becomes most apparent in women's collective actions which in their appearance rise above

the ordinary. Let us be wary of models, however. These actions would be quickly coopted as manifestations of living or body art, or body language. Feminist art is not a stylistic trend. Women's actions or demonstrations are not artistic events. The relationship between political actions and art—as well as the reflecting upon this relationship—cannot operate on the level of traditional leftist animosity to art. Nor can it exist on the level of apolitical esoteric views of the type which allowed a demonstration for legalized abortion to be interpreted as a rebirth of the “happening” scene. The point here is neither to rescue the notion of the “beautiful illusion,” nor to overextend the concept of aesthetics, a term which by definition already encompasses all activity and hence has become totally meaningless. 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.

*Translated by Beth Weckmueller*