

Preface

Combining aesthetic theory with gender analysis opens a large and diverse territory to explore. Both familiar issues in philosophy of art and new, expanded questions about the influence of culture on imagination and identity have become subjects of feminist research. Film, literature, graphic arts, advertising, and the legacies of history all contribute to the forces that shape self-image, desire, behavior, and social role – as well as the ability to imagine possibilities for change. This issue brings together an international group of scholars from several disciplines who explore gender and femininity, sexuality and its several iterations, and the politics of everyday life and culture.

Research concerning gender and aesthetics has expanded enormously since the advent of feminist scholarship, which initiated philosophical perspectives in aesthetics in the 1970s and 1980s. The authors here situate their own thinking in relation to earlier feminist work, to history and the classics of philosophy, and to several emerging research perspectives that point to future investigations. Some of the early efforts of feminist scholarship remain of interest and continue to provide fruitful avenues for exploration. Artists and their works sometimes escape familiar stereotypes and expectations, presenting modes of being that the contemporary scholar can revisit and examine. Thus historical works of art, literature, and philosophy continue to provide room to explore the conceptual frameworks that have shaped our ways of life. The import of such studies extends beyond historical exercise, for the texts of women writers and artists, some of them neglected or dismissed as insignificant, often disclose recognizable details of the lives of women in the present day. The authors in this issue investigate texts and artists of the past and present to

probe different visions of women's roles and female identities, both their differences within and between societies and the threads of commonality across history and culture. Mindful of the political and economic factors that frame artistic creativity, they note that what may seem conventional in one context might be liberating in another.

Just as politically minded analysis strives to uncover – and elude – the limits of social formation of gender identity and behavior, so it must acknowledge that such forces are to a degree inescapable, since one never exists outside of culture. Noting their effects nonetheless opens our minds to what might be possible and desirable for the future. These authors review the history of feminist approaches to aesthetics, critique some predecessors, and revise ideas to fit a changing world. Together, their efforts promote the further questioning of ideals at a time when gender is being simultaneously promulgated, undermined, and sometimes radically altered.

In the last few years, many philosophers of aesthetics have turned attention to the “everyday,” that is, to aspects of quotidian life that have traditionally fallen outside philosophical attention. Interest in everyday experiences is rooted in critiques of standard approaches to aesthetic culture, which formerly attended almost exclusively either to fine art or to experiences of nature. The ordinary domestic or work routine did not seem to offer a great deal of scope for theoretical probing. However, scholars of both aesthetics and feminism have explored ordinary, seemingly insignificant experiences and found creative voices and activities, perhaps especially from women whose traditional roles have situated them outside the realm of high culture.

A question persists for the study of gender and for feminist approaches to aesthetics in its various forms, namely: To what degree does a “feminist” perspective overlap with what can be considered a “feminine” approach to cultural values? This is a tricky issue to dissect, since social framing of character traits that are designated proper to females has long been recognized as constricting opportunities for education and employment, not to mention personal development outside conventional stereotypes. And yet at the same time, so-called feminine traits may also be ones that the dominant culture undervalues, and hence many feminists seek to reclaim them. Moreover, gendered characteristics are partially formed by the domestic arrangements that obtain in different societies, and so generalization about what is to count among desirable traits and roles needs to take social context into consideration.

Thus this complex question is far from settled, and it continues to prompt fresh thinking about cultural possibilities and social values. The essays in this journal issue contribute to unraveling its meanings and keep alive the promises, hazards, and possibilities inherent in its potential answers.

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