

# Considering Feminist Aesthetics in Relation to Disinterestedness \*

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses how feminists tackled gender bias rooted in the traditional concept of disinterestedness to reveal the importance of considering the positive directions of feminist aesthetics today. Unveiling the gendered aspects of philosophical concepts and theory is nothing new, as this was one of the main works of feminist aesthetics back in the 1990s. However, I would like to repropose these arguments as necessary factors to show how feminist aesthetics continue to play an impactful role in modern discussions, especially when focusing on the positive side of their contributions. First, I begin by outlining Kant's account of disinterestedness, followed by Korsmeyer's criticism of the relationships between disinterestedness and universality as well as how it could raise the problem of the male gaze. Then, I nudge the discussion to the assessment of perspectivism by introducing the objections made by Eaton. Finally, I conclude how the attempts of feminist aesthetics can be thought not simply as a complete denial of traditional concepts (including disinterestedness), but rather as a proposal of different aspects allowing us to expand our discussion to wider aesthetic topics.

**Keywords:** Feminist Aesthetics, Feminism, Gender and Beauty, Disinterestedness

## Introduction

How can aesthetics be understood from a feminist perspective? Many might think of feminism in relation to the women's liberation movement that took place in the 1960s and 70s. This movement which exposed how women were excluded from politics and education eventually developed into a cross-disciplinary social movement appealing to society concerning women's freedom.<sup>1</sup> Publications such as "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" by Linda Nochlin in 1971 and "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by Laura Mulvey in 1975 provided the opportunity to consider gender across various art-related fields.<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here that feminism did not suddenly emerge as a movement in the late 1960s. The so-called women's liberation movement is called second-wave feminism. The first wave can be traced back to the movement for women's civil rights that became active with the birth of the modern state at the end of the eighteenth century. The women's liberation movement forms a phenomenon that spread from the root of this first-wave feminism (cf. Pollock 2021, 145).

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, gender refers to general usage based on the UN Women Japan Office website, defining it as "social attributes and opportunities determined on the basis of being male or female, relationships between women and men, girls and boys, and relationship between women and women, men and men" (<https://japan.unwomen.org/ja/news-and-events/news/2018/9/definition-gender>, last viewed on June 20, 2022).

that these specific individual discussions gradually developed into philosophical thought experiments that targeted the theories and concepts that define beauty itself (cf. Mochida 2001). Against this background, feminist aesthetics emerged in the 1990s and ever since then it has been the site of active controversy in the West.<sup>3</sup> While feminist aesthetics includes various approaches that should not be understood as identical (cf. Hein 1995; Eaton 2008; Devereaux 2014), these approaches have the common tendency of critically examining the traditional theories of aesthetics and revealing gendered aspects in the academic study of aesthetics and the concepts used in it (cf. Korsmeyer and Weiser 2021).

This paper considers how critical reexamination of conceptual systems and theories in aesthetics has been conducted from a feminist perspective based on several feminist interpretations of the concept of disinterestedness. Disinterestedness has been denounced by many feminists as being closely related to a masculine stance. Hence, examining feminist interpretations of the concept of disinterestedness is an important task to be undertaken to obtain an overview of the central ideas of feminist aesthetics. In the first section, drawing on the leading philosopher of feminist aesthetics Caroline Korsmeyer, I examine why the concept of disinterestedness is considered to be gender biased. In the second section, exploring the issue of perspectivism arising from Korsmeyer's account, I follow up on the analytic philosopher Anne Eaton's claims and analyse feminist attitudes toward traditional aesthetic theories. In the third section, I present the direction of feminist aesthetics today in relation to the previous discussions. My goal is to showcase how feminist aesthetics is not ultimately a simple negation of traditional concepts but rather offers us the possibility of expanding the discussion of aesthetics by proposing diverse perspectives.

## 1. The Gender Issue in the Concept of Disinterestedness

Korsmeyer was among the foremost thinkers in feminist aesthetics in the 1990s. In the two collections of essays on feminist aesthetics published in 1993 and 1995, Korsmeyer repeatedly claims that traditional theories of aesthetics are not useful to feminists (cf. Korsmeyer 1993, viii; 1995, 15). Korsmeyer's analysis of the concept of disinterestedness can be found in the publications in 1998 and 2004. There, Korsmeyer identifies Kant as the person who established the definition of the eighteenth-century aesthetic judgment and developed the archetype of the theory of beauty that persists until today. Korsmeyer then suggests disinterestedness as the starting point for feminist criticisms (cf. Korsmeyer 1998, 146; Kneller 2014A, 423). Before we delve into Korsmeyer's criticisms, let us first briefly review Kant's account of the concept of disinterestedness.

In the first part of *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant identifies four moments that explain the conditions enabling us to form a certain judgment when we judge something to be beautiful—not what beauty *is*, but what *happens* to us when we judge something to be beautiful. This

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<sup>3</sup> In the past, feminist aesthetics was translated as *feminism-bigaku* [フェミニズム美学] in Japanese (cf. Koike 1992), but given the recent trend of translating feminist philosophy as *feminist-tetsugaku* [フェミニスト哲学], this paper uses the translation *feminist-bigaku* [フェミニスト美学].

judgment, which Kant calls a judgment of taste, is distinguished from a cognitive judgment in that it does not relate representations to the object through understanding but to the subjective feelings of pleasure and displeasure through imagination (V 203 - 204). Further, drawing a comparison between the agreeable and the good, Kant distinguishes the pleasure of the beautiful from that which is connected with the existence [*Existenz*] of the object—Kant defines this type of pleasure as interest as it is based on the faculty of desire—calling the pleasure that does not involve desire as disinterested. In this way, Kant characterizes the judgment of taste as “simply contemplative... judgment, which is indifferent as to the existence [*Dasein*] of an object; and only decides how its character stands with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure” (V 209). Thus, it is a judgment independent of both the faculty of cognition and desire.

Kant continues, asserting that this disinterested condition lacking any interest in an object, cannot be founded on “personal conditions [*Privatbedingungen*] to which his own subjective self might alone be a party” (V 211). It means that we should be able to consider this stance valid for everyone. The justification of universality here is found in the mental state, in particular, the free play of imagination and understanding (V 217). Kant identifies this as “cognition in general.” In ordinary cognition, determination takes place when understanding conceptually unifies the intuition that is given by the imagination. However, regarding taste, while imagination and understanding uphold a necessary relationship, they are not limited to the ways in which the concepts of understanding determine intuition as is done in ordinary cognition. Thus, free play takes place. In this way, in relation to “cognition in general,” Kant posits the universality of the judgment of taste.<sup>4</sup>

How does Korsmeyer assess Kant’s version of aesthetic judgment? Let us first look at Korsmeyer’s paper published in 1998. With regard to Kant’s disinterested pleasure, according to which judgment of taste does not involve any interest in the existence of an object but simply liking its mere representation, Korsmeyer explains this as “nothing to do with the instrumental or practical use of an object, with its religious or moral meaning, or with any desire to possess or employ the object” (Korsmeyer 1998, 146), emphasizing that behind this lies the assumption that there is a commonality of human nature.

Kant and his predecessors believed that such qualifications were also the prerequisites for a subjective judgment of pleasure that could still be considered universal and necessary because the restrictions on aesthetic pleasure eliminate all that is idiosyncratic or personal about the act of evaluation, leaving the common disposition of human nature at the core of the apprehension of aesthetic value. (Korsmeyer 1998, 146)

Examining our own ability to judge beauty, even in a subjective experience we cannot help but suspect that there might be something more in it than just individual preferences. Korsmeyer claims that disinterestedness is nothing more than a vacuous answer to this vague suspicion with

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<sup>4</sup> For citations of Kant’s works, the volume number (Roman numerals) and page number (Arabic numerals) of the Academy edition are given. In preparing the summary of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, reference was made to Otabe 2021, Kumano 2017, and Pöltner 2008/2017.

respect to how subjective judgment can overcome particularity. Further, from Korsmeyer's indication of disinterestedness as "the language developed to negotiate this delicate combination of subjectivity and objectivity" (Korsmeyer 1998, 149), we can identify Korsmeyer's obvious concern with the power of someone who established the concept of disinterestedness. This concern over power becomes more evident when the concept of disinterestedness is connected with universality.

The notion of disinterested pleasure made possible arguments that judgments of taste could be both subjective (as pleasures obviously are) and exemplary guides for other perceivers. For if interests are self-directed, *disinterested* pleasures might be occasioned only by elements of human nature that are shared by all. By such accounts, the similarity of the constitution of all human perceivers is sufficient grounds to expect that among those whose experience is not muddled by desire, interest, bad cultural education, or emotional overload, there will be a general commonality of opinion about matters of beauty in nature and art. (Korsmeyer 1998, 150)

In opposition to Kant, Korsmeyer argues that the act of presupposing universality inevitably incorporates biased values concerning ages, environment, and historical background. In other words, Korsmeyer's concern lies in the lack of attention paid to the person who made the decision as to who represents the common human nature. Because the presupposition of universality hides various matters including class and nationality with respect to who represents that common nature, when it comes to the explanation of aesthetic judgments, the term universality already incorporates reigning social values—if we focus on gender, it will be the *male-dominated* attitudes and views.<sup>5</sup> Korsmeyer's book in 2004 specifically discusses this point and sharply criticizes the demand for universality in aesthetic judgments as a result of an attempt to control and homogenize pleasure.

In promulgating the existence of standards for subjective pleasures, the preferences of people who were already culturally accredited, as it were, became the standard to be emulated. Ideas about taste and beauty, no matter how assiduous the attempt to universalize standards and to "purify" them of bias and prejudice, seem ineluctably to absorb reigning social values. (Korsmeyer 2004, 48)

Consider, for example, the artwork such as that of Jean-Léon Gérôme, *A Roman Slave Market* (c. 1884), showing a woman portrayed as a sexual object. In order to be disinterested in this artwork, viewers are expected to reject their desires and appreciate the work not in terms of its content but with reference to its formal qualities. That is, viewers are not expected to pay

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<sup>5</sup> Taking into account Kant's clear distinction between the *quid facti* and *quid iuris* in the judgment of taste (cf. Otabe 2021, 66), Korsmeyer's criticism might be handled more carefully. Kant considers universality of judgments of taste as reflecting an ability inherent in human nature, that is, the free play of understanding and imagination that is applicable to all human beings. We must further see whether this free play really leads to the presupposition of the common human nature that Korsmeyer is aware of.

sexual attention to the objectified woman, nor, on the contrary, are they to sympathize with the woman and her reality that is depicted in the work. What is required instead is an “act of mind-numbing blindness” (Korsmeyer 2004, 51). Even if the work clearly emphasizes sexual desire and even if it clearly invites people’s interest on this basis, the judgment of beauty here must be disinterested. This appears as if the “recommended disinterested attitude serves as a safe ground against desire, specifically heterosexual male desire” (Korsmeyer 2004, 53).

It is worth noting that Korsmeyer’s criticism of the concept of disinterestedness focuses on artworks and it is unclear whether her critique would be the same in the observation of beauty in nature. Moreover, it is also notable that Korsmeyer does not refer to the intellectual interest that Kant referred to in the theory of deduction in the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, following Korsmeyer’s argument, we can say that the concept of disinterestedness merely encourages a perspective that favors a male-dominated pleasure or a masculine stance. Hence, the concept of disinterestedness which is thought to be gender-neutral can be seen as more biased toward men. Saying that one can see a certain object without desire, men can secure the position of the viewer to the fullest content while women are given the passive role of being looked at. This masculinity of aesthetic ideology (cf. Klinger 1998, 343) contains in itself the theory of the male gaze.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Korsmeyer concludes that the act of establishing an aesthetic judgment as a function that applies to everyone will, in the end, only legitimize the values of beauty that are presupposed in the reigning social value. Korsmeyer asserts “not only that a neutral, universal point of view is impossible, but... any attempt to formulate it will be distorted by the class, gender, national, and historical perspective of the formulator. Universalist ideals have been replaced by the value of the particular perspective mindful of its situation in society and history, without pretense to universality” (Korsmeyer 2004, 56).

## 2. Countering the Traditions of Aesthetics

Though Korsmeyer’s criticism of disinterestedness begins with the reexamination of traditional aesthetic theories, it gives the impression that the intention lies in criticizing universality itself. Korsmeyer notes that whatever theory we establish can always be rooted in a certain perspective. If so, this seems as if Korsmeyer is concluding that it is impossible to assume any ideal especially when it comes to aesthetic judgment. If neutrality is never possible, and if universality inevitably involves a perspective, should we dismiss the pursuit of this ideal as meaningless?

This is important to consider in assessing feminist aesthetics. Are feminist critiques in aesthetics conducted solely with the aim of abandoning the traditional theory? To address this,

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<sup>6</sup> See Kneller’s point that the same can be said for the feminist criticism of Kant’s theory of the sublime as masculine (cf. Kneller 2014B, 74). In fact, as there are studies that argue that the approach of feminist aesthetics to natural beauty is insufficient (cf. Lintott 2010), further investigation is required on this matter.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Korsmeyer does not claim that only the singular male gaze observes artworks. Korsmeyer states that the importance lies in our awareness of the power of looking, and only by taking this into consideration can we discover the possibilities of various positions. For more on the male gaze, refer to the works of John Berger, in addition to Mulvey whose work is presented in this paper (cf. Berger 1972).

let us explore Eaton's writing, which expressed concerns with respect to Korsmeyer's approach to universality. How should we counter tradition after we recognize its bias?

Eaton's paper in 2008 begins with an overview of feminist critiques of the art canon and the way that it has systematically been part of a male-dominated hierarchy. Eaton then expresses the importance of examining traditional philosophical theories that take on this task. In the latter half of the paper, Eaton focuses on overcoming traditional theories of aesthetics, or, as she says, "the prevailing conceptions of art and artistic production (including talent), theories of aesthetic experience and judgment, and the prevailing standards of taste and artistic excellence" (Eaton 2008, 883). Within this context, Eaton categorizes Korsmeyer's claim as perspectivism and expresses several concerns about such an approach.

Eaton's concerns over perspectivism can be summarized in three points. First, simply because a universal voice—or what has been thought to be a universal voice—is found to be inherent to a male-centered origin or is applied based on bias, this does not mean that the concept itself is flawed. To say that certain past concepts were biased does not necessarily entail that all concepts are worthless. Second, Eaton notes that a perspectivist approach can fall into relativism. In particular, Eaton criticizes the recent tendency of some feminists to be reluctant to evaluate whether one artwork is better than the other. Eaton claims that this is due to wrongheaded thinking, and it rather disregards the efforts that feminists have made in the past to reevaluate women's great works that had been neglected. Third, Eaton points out the deviation from the original goal of feminism. In relation to the second point, Eaton questions whether it is a fundamental goal for feminism to conclude, as Korsmeyer does, that all judgments are distorted. Initially, feminism's objective had been to show how traditional norms contained prejudices and not denouncing universality itself. In this context, feminists challenged traditional aesthetic theories including disinterestedness as a term presenting a potential disadvantage for women (cf. Eaton 2008, 884-885). Here, we may conclude that Eaton's aim was not to abandon universality but rather to suggest an imbalance in the tradition while continuing to seek unbiased concepts of universality, impartiality, and objectivity.

What can we find from Eaton's analysis? It is noteworthy that Eaton's concern lies merely in perspectivism's stance of strongly denying objectivity and neutrality and not in terms of the potential relationship between a certain perspective and aesthetic judgment. This can also be seen from how Eaton considers the direction of what is called revisionism favorably. For example, Brand, whom Eaton categorizes as a revisionist claims that "there can be no such thing as a disinterested approach to a work of art" (Brand 1998, 7). However, Brand also acknowledges the importance of not giving up the search for obtaining it.<sup>8</sup> This point, that is, to address the

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<sup>8</sup> Brand specifically compares the viewing of a nude woman depicted in Ingres' *Fountain* (1856) with the viewing of the performance art piece *The Reincarnation of St. Orlan* (1990) in which the French artist Orlan remodels her own face based on the motifs of beauty in Western art history such as the Mona Lisa and Venus. Brand argues for perspectivism based on the question of whether it is possible to view Orlan's bloody plastic surgery in the same way as one could view the contrapposto of the female figure in Ingres' *Fountain* in a disinterested way. Providing the famous optical illusion of a duck and a rabbit as an example, Brand points out that when confronting a work of art one can choose either to focus on the content and then turn to the formal qualities, or, conversely, one can look at the formal qualities first and then face the reality happening within the work, and stated the possibility of switching perspectives (cf. Brand 1998).

influence of a certain perspective while remaining cautious of drastic changes in concepts including disinterestedness, is why Eaton reacted favorably to Brand's interpretation. What Eaton aims for is not a complete retreat from traditional aesthetic theories but rather a revision of theories and concepts discredited by masculine prejudices. Thus, this is, as Eaton says, "the most pressing project facing the feminist philosophy of art" (Eaton 2008, 885).

### 3. The Direction of Feminist Aesthetics

The approach calling for revisions of aesthetic theories, like Eaton's, features rather a positive direction different from a purely negative feminism which firmly denies traditional theories. Here, the positive nature refers to feminism as forming a means of active reconsideration that can contribute to the development of aesthetics theories – but in what ways can this revision take place?

We may find a hint of an answer to this question in Herta Nagl-Docekal's interpretation of a "strong and weak interpretation of aesthetics" (Nagl-Docekal 1999/2006, 108). Like Eaton, Nagl-Docekal argues that, when criticizing theories such as aesthetic judgment and disinterestedness, it is important to look at the connection that these have to the traditional values and the concepts they are linked to rather than rejecting the concepts themselves. Nagl-Docekal reassures readers that "when confronting any existing idea, it is not a simple binary choice between complete acceptance or total rejection" (Nagl-Docekal 1999/2006, 108). By strong interpretation, Nagl-Docekal refers to aesthetic judgments and related aesthetic theories that were established in the eighteenth century and their subsequent developments. Today, it is virtually impossible to believe that we can "support the unlimited aesthetic universalism," or, in other words, "expression of absolute truth in art and ultimate, absolute evaluation of an aesthetic value" (Nagl-Docekal 1999/2006, 108). This is clear from the feminist criticisms that we have looked at so far and from the doubts that have arisen toward traditional theories in the rise of modernism. However, neither firmly keeping hold of such strong theories nor continuing to reject the tradition itself by citing issues with theories based on such strong interpretations is practical. Nagl-Docekal argues for the importance of freeing ourselves from strong interpretations and opening up for new possibilities. What, then, are the weak interpretations that can free us from strong ones?

The weak interpretation that Nagl-Docekal presents invites us to focus more on the background of the traditional theories. What was it that these aesthetic theories were seeking in the first place? What did people want to claim when they established them? Nagl-Docekal states that before we lay stress on the consequences resulting from traditional theories, we should pay more attention to the reasons why one expected such consequences. In other words, the important point of a weak interpretation is "not on the theories themselves, but rather on the agenda that underlies them, namely, the reconstruction in the form of a philosophical concept of our everyday understanding of what we mean when we talk about art" (Nagl-Docekal 1999/2006, 109).

Let us apply Nagl-Docekal's approach to the concept of disinterestedness. When introducing the weak interpretation of the concept of disinterestedness, Nagl-Docekal does not mention its relationship to universality which Korsmeyer was concerned with. However, we should be able to apply the weak interpretation here as well, as disinterestedness is, in the first place, merely a

passive stance derived from the point at which we cannot but assume universality as the ground of the given judgment cannot be founded on personal conditions. It is true that the act of presupposing universality could involve an unavoidable question of who should represent the common human nature but considering that an absolute universality is being imposed is nothing but to focus only on the consequences of the theory itself, leading to a strong interpretation. This is probably the reason why Korsmeyer's criticism of disinterestedness appears to conclude that it is impossible to assume any ideal for aesthetic judgments. However, with a weak interpretation, aesthetic judgments can be seen as taking into consideration the question of why one cannot help but expect, based on their everyday experiences, that beauty communicates beyond people's inclination.<sup>9</sup>

How can we judge what is beautiful? How can we require others to judge something in the same way that we do? Here, the important point should be to look at what is behind these basic questions of beauty and the intention in trying to answer such questions. This may not seem new but is something that feminism must continuously return to and it clearly shows the significance of questioning the assumptions of aesthetic theories.

## Conclusion

The strong and weak interpretations introduced by Nagl-Docekal should provide a useful framework for the future of feminist aesthetics. For example, Eaton notes that themes related to the body, such as fashion, food, and taste, as well as themes that have not been treated because they were considered ugly, are indicative of the "future of feminist aesthetics" (cf. Eaton 2008, 887). A list of these themes might produce the impression that because these themes (as of now) have a high affinity with femininity, they are also unable to break away from traditional binary oppositions.<sup>10</sup> However, through an explanation of a weak interpretation, that is, taking the stance of questioning the premise makes it clear that these themes are not chosen in relation to the dualism of masculinity vs. femininity or traditional theory vs. feminine theory, nor are they chosen to highlight these oppositional structures. Of course, at certain times, oppositional structures are strategically introduced only to have them radically expose gender bias in relation to traditional aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> However, we need to reaffirm the fact that many feminists today readily acknowledge that this so-called feminine aesthetic is something that has to be overcome. To continue the discussion of feminism today, it is essential to confirm that we are now living in a post-feminine aesthetic age. The once-extreme emphasis on femininity must be taken merely as one kind to challenge tradition as a tool to make the voice heard.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See also Kneller's indication that Kant's concept of disinterestedness must be understood in a broader systematic thought framework (cf. Kneller 2014B, 74).

<sup>10</sup> Examples of this are dichotomous thinking, i.e. that which divorces reason and emotion, mind and body, spirit and flesh. These binary oppositions are at the core of the conceptual system used in philosophy, and the opposing concepts of male and female are founded on them (cf. Nagano 2020, 32).

<sup>11</sup> Representing this idea is Christine Battersby who noted the gender issues inherent in the existing concept of genius, supporting the restructuring of the concept of aesthetics as centered on women's creativity and genius (cf. Battersby 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Further discussion can be found in Felski's criticism of feminist aesthetics (cf. Felski 1995; 2014). Klinger



At the first emergence of feminist aesthetics, its main emphasis was on how concepts used in aesthetics that appeared applicable to all human beings regardless of gender are, in fact, deeply connected to male-centered bias. This is represented in terms of the concept of disinterestedness which was centered by feminists. By critically examining these traditions, new perspectives are presented, allowing us greater awareness, needless to say, of how valuable these inputs were.

On the other hand, reference to these issues forced feminism to deal with traditional theories and concepts themselves on another level. If aesthetic theories are gendered at their core, then it might be concluded that they should be abandoned. However, where we apply feminist approaches, it is important not to forget that revealing the biases in traditional theories such as disinterestedness, does not necessarily lead to the abandonment of the theory due to its biases. It is essential to disentangle the connection between aesthetic concepts and patriarchal structures; to do so, we need to clarify what is related to male-dominated (or intended to be male-dominated) values and in what way.

It should be noted here that the approach of exploring new themes to be discussed in the aesthetics discourse is not directly intended to confront the tradition or any existing frameworks. It should also be noted that the binary conceptualization of the masculine and the feminine which is often used in feminist reexaminations is a mere tool to showcase bias and is not meant to categorize something or to emphasize a distinction. Feminism does not aim to prove the superiority of women over men. It does not aim to deny masculine values. It is likewise not about classifying gender as either male or female and forgetting other terms. Feminism is merely an approach to examine an imbalance caused by privilege. If this is the case, it will also be necessary to explore how we can incorporate the framework of intersectionality in the analysis of aesthetic theories. We should carefully consider whether traditional aesthetic theories can be applied without imbalance outside the framework of the male and the West. In order to contribute to such new arguments, the attitude that is first and foremost required when we discuss aesthetics from a feminist perspective is to recognize the positive side of feminist aesthetics which paves the way for a breakaway from monolithic values.

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also states that efforts to reformulate specific concepts, categories, and values of the traditional aesthetic ideology from a feminist perspective "simply repeat the old positions and their problems under a new rubric. In substituting the idea of feminine creativity or a female genius for masculine creativity and a male genius, the dualism of the One and the Other is reproduced. Thus we fall victim precisely to the structure that we should criticize and leave behind" (Klinger 1998, 349). This clearly indicates that the present age is beyond a feminine aesthetic.

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