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Disinterestedness & Political Art

Peggy Zeglin Brand

Can an ordinary viewer ever experience art - particularly politically charged, socially relevant art - in a neutral, detached, and objective way? The familiar philosophical notion of disinterestedness has its roots in eighteenth century theories of taste and was refined throughout the twentieth century. In contrast, many contemporary theorists have argued for what I call an 'interested approach' in order to expand beyond the traditional emphasis on neutrality and universality. Each group, in effect, has argued for the value of a work of art by excluding the other's approach. This essay will consider the legacy of the concept of disinterestedness for contemporary aesthetic theory in light of challenges posed by postmodern skepticism regarding the possibility of disinterestedness, and by the difficulties involved in appreciating political art with a disinterested attitude. My principal examples of political art will be drawn from feminist art.[1]

Unlike traditional philosophers, I will advocate that an interested stance toward art is, at times, inevitable and appropriate. I will also argue not only that feminist art -and by extension political art of all kinds - can be experienced disinterestedly, but that it should be. As a position inconsistent with both traditionalists and feminist critics of tradition, my recommendation of both disinterestedness and interestedness affords what I take to be the fullest and fairest experience of a work of art.

In the early eighteenth century Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, proposed disinterestedness as both a moraland an aesthetic ideal in opposition to the notion of private interest (derived from Hobbes) in order to isolate the aspects of a mental state that precluded serving one's own ends. Disinterestedness was contrasted with the desire to possess or use an object. Francis Hutcheson concurred and recommended the exclusion of 'feeling to what farther advantage or detriment the use of such objects might tend.' [2] Edmund Burke placed disinterestedness at the

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center of his theory of beauty, frequently citing the female body as a beautiful object which can be perceived as beautiful only if the sole interest of the perceiver is in perceiving for its own sake and not in the desire for possession. In speaking of the quality of beauty exemplified in 'gradual variation,' he states:

'Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts;the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried.'[3]

Archibald Alison maintained that it was not enough to lack self-seeking motives; rather, we must attain a state of mind in which 'the attention is so little occupied by any private or particular object of thought, as to leave us open to all the impressions, which the objects that are before us can produce.'[4]

David Hume contrasted private and public interest; public interest was communal and free of individual bonds. Hume adumbrated Kant's sense of disinterestedness in his recommendation that a true judge is one who is free from personal prejudice: 'considering myself as a man in general, [I must] forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances.' [5]

Kant expanded the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness, separating it from the practical and conceptual realms: to be disinterested was to be without interest in the object's existence. Making the notion of disinterestedness central transferred the focus of the aesthetic experience to the perceiver and away from the work of art. It was only a short step to the aesthetic attitude theorists' insistence that attitude was the primary determinant of one's aesthetic judgments. Jerome Stolnitz, a twentieth century aesthetic attitude theorist, extended the previous ideas of Alison:

'To perceive disinterestedly is to make oneself a pure, unflawed mirror, prepared to receive without distortion 'all the impressions, which the objects that are before us can produce.' [6]

On this view, no object could be excluded from the realm of the aesthetic; by properly adopting a particular mode of perception, any object could be perceived with an aesthetic attitude, i.e., disinterestedly. Thus, far from acknowledging what some would consider a thoroughly human and 'natural' reaction we have to images of the body- especially to the many depictions we find in the history of art of the female nude - these philosophers promulgated a selfconscious, deliberate and controlled transformation of interest into the more acceptable form of dispassionate dis-interest.

Consider what this means in practical terms for viewing art and the ways in which we have been taught to look at art. Let us review a typical explanation of an artwork by the noted psychologist of art, Rudolf Arnheim, in his landmark publication, *Art and Visual Perception* , Jean Auguste Ingres's painting of 1856 *La Source.* Arnheim concurs with the generally accepted view that visual perception 'is

not a passive recording of stimulus material but an active concern of the mind.'[7] Note the process by which he analyzes the ways in which an image can be perceived and subsequently interpreted. First, he refers to the painted nude girl standing upright in a frontal position and holding a water jug as follows:

'At first sight it shows such qualities as lifelikeness, sensuousness, simplicity. . . Ingres' nudes make the observer almost forget that he is looking at works of art.'[8]

Gazing as a male (which he unavoidably is), this initial reaction is not based so much on confusion making less ambiguous what he sees as an automatic response to the sexuality depicted, a reaction perhaps not unlike the one the painter may have felt who found himself painting the actual nude model before him. The implication is that it is difficult for a male viewer to maintain a disengagement of interest given the lifelikeness of the painted girl posed and displayed before him. Arnheim's initial reaction is unabashedly interested as he points out how the jug and the girl are both vessels with 'uterine connotations', that is to say, 'the vessel openly releases the stream whereas the lap is locked. In short, the picture plays on the theme of withheld but promised femininity.'[9]

He goes on, however, to provide a lengthy description of the formal properties of the scene: the unnatural posture of the girl as she tilts the jug she's holding, the tilt to the left of both head and jug, the analogous flows of water and hair, the vertical axis and the oblique central axes and their contrasting curves and contours. He concludes:

'The remarkable fact about a masterpiece like 'La Source' is that in looking at it we sense the effect of the formal devices whose meaning makes it such a complete representation of life and yet we may not be conscious of these devices at all.'[10]

How does he isolate and interpret these formal devices that so deceptively convince us that there is a lifelike girl before us? His answer, found another of his books, Visual Thinking, provides a useful lesson as to how the mind is able to abstract an object under observation from its context. He calls this process 'subtracting the context'.

'The observer may wish to peel off the context in order to obtain the object as it is and as it behaves by itself, as though it existed in complete isolation. This may seem to be the only possible way of performing an abstraction.'[11]

By this route, he attains a disinterested approach, by stripping away as much interest as he can. In attempting to treat the depicted object 'as though it existed in complete isolation' from its context, he abstracts the compositional elements by blocking their associations and similarity to actual nude girls (and thereby subtracting the context). Arnheim sees this as a clear indication of the 'intelligence of visual perception' (this is the chapter title in which the visual exercise is embedded); such intelligence exemplifies the cognitive, i.e. rational activity - the 'active concern of the mind' – that plays so crucial a role in perception and interpretation.

Denying one's identification and involvement with the work on a personal level

is what many feminists see as a masculinist stance, that is, one that seeks mastery even over one's own bodily responses. Inhibiting one's natural and instinctive gendered reactions in a self-conscious, controlling way is seen as psychological censure. According to feminist thinking, disinterestedness is a prime example of a masculinist mode of thought in which it is assumed that the best (and only?) way to experience a work of art is as a neutral, unbiased, selfless observer. Feminists doubt one can ever really be neutral and they discourage its use as a tool in the evaluation of art.

What is notable for our purposes here is that a feminist stance toward art recommends the antithesis of the suggestions listed by the eighteenth century philosophers. In stark contrast, a feminist stance -- often considered subjective or emotional -- encourages interest in, identification with, and nurturing of awareness. Thus, it promotes interest with regard to how the image of woman is used or possessed; an inclusion of feeling for advantage or detriment; a nurturing of one's personal, individual interests; and the open admission that no viewer is a 'pure, unflawed mirror' ready to receive with openness all the impressions which the objects that are before us can produce. In effect, to adopt a feminist stance is to refuse to 'dis' one's interest and to acknowledge and even encourage an interested approach. For feminists, there can be no such thing as a disinterested approach to a work of art; the very attempt participates in an endeavor to posit a particular type of viewer as an ideal, neutral spectator. The only recommended way to properly and fully experience a work of art is with an avowedly gendered. identificatory, interested stance.

According to feminist art critic, Katy Deepwell,

'Feminism's critique of the disinterested observer exposed the partisan nature of all readings (when that 'neutral' figure was identified as white, male and middle-class), and began to explore how reading is inevitably informed by political positions.'[12]

On this view, disinterestedness is a masculinist stance toward art that involves what feminists have recently come to identify as the male gaze.

The most familiar and influential articulation of a theory of the gaze comes from the 1975 film criticism of Laura Mulvey. In an essay entitled, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey initiated an analysis of women characters in the films of Hitchcock and Sternberg based on psychoanalytic readings that identified women as objects of the male gaze.[13] In uncovering and explicating a notion of the male gaze Mulvey sought to challenge the conventional notions of pleasure derived from mainstream film by highlighting the role of gender in the spectator's viewing of the female body on the screen. When a male viewer looks at the image of a woman, he typically looks with a possessing, desiring, objectifying look. His gaze succumbs to his scopophilic tendency to look at her as erotic object, to derive masculine pleasure from the power of his gaze over her body -- a body on view for his delectation. This gaze is similar to two other types of male gazing that actually takes place within

film-making: the gaze of the film-maker and camera men who manipulate the technology that defines the medium, and the gaze of the male actors who look at and interact with the woman being filmed. For Mulvey, cinema is uniquely positioned as the artistic medium that provides the paradigm of the male gaze:

'The place of the look defines cinema, the possibility of shifting it, varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, striptease, theatre, shows and so on. Going far beyond high-lighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself .' [14]

Thus, the person looked at is the woman. Her spectator is male: Hitchcock as film-maker, his camera men, the male 'heroes' within the films, and the male audience.[15]

In a later essay, Mulvey addresses the challenge from many readers that film-goers are presumed to be exclusively male. Rather than attempt to isolate and explain a particularly female look or gaze which might give rise to a particularly feminine sort of pleasure, she instead extended her earlier analysis to female viewers, claiming that women who watch the same films come to view them as men -- with a male gaze -- learned through habituation and training. The female spectator's masculine point of view is a 'trans-sex identification,' i.e., 'a habit that very easily becomes second nature.' [16] in other words, women gaze at women in films as men do: by viewing them as erotic objects on view for the pleasure of heterosexual males (both inside and outside the filmic structure), as potential possessions of males, as subjects of male fantasies and desires.[17]

Clearly, Mulvey's thesis is not without problems. It has spawned an enormous amount of commentary and debate. It is undeniably the source, however, of two important consequences: (1) an ongoing investigation into the question of how women artists and film-makers can utilize a woman's body in visual representations without becoming complicit voyeurs, and (2) spin-off notions of the male gaze such as bell hooks' 'oppositional gaze.' What these varied analyses share is a deep and unyielding skepticism of anything like a neutral, distanced, disinterested mode of perception. The general consensus is that there is no disinterested gazer of visual images, only one whose gaze is saturated with interest. With this recognition, it comes as no surprise that most feminists advocate a pro-active, self-conscious, interested form of looking: one that blocks our learned tendency to view any subject according to conventional values of critical reception.

For instance, along the lines of Mulvey's concept of trans-sex identification, bell hooks proposes a similar notion: what might aptly be called trans-race identification. In the early days of television and film, black spectators became habituated to look at blacks on the screen the same way as whites, that is, to fail to notice the absence of blacks in television and Hollywood film, to accept without challenge stereotypically degrading and dehumanizing representations of blacks, and to laugh

condescendingly at black characters in early shows like 'Our Gang' and 'Amos and Andy.' Only within the last few years has a body of film theory and criticism begun to emerge that recommends a self-consciousness about the embeddedness of color within one's gaze, especially an awareness of the way in which race and racism determines the visual construction of gender. In an essay entitled, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,' hooks writes:

'Looking at films with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallocentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed.'[18]

On hooks' analysis, another layer is added to the construction of a feminist interested stance. Besides gender, one is also encouraged to gaze with interest in the racial dynamics of the representations of women. Many other layers of interest can be added as well: class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, and so on.[19] This returns us to the topic of political art and my intitial question, can one experience a work of art, particularly a feminist work of art, in a neutral, detached, objective, disinterested way?

Consider one example of particularly provocative feminist art: the performances of Orlan, a French artist who began her career as a painter and has systematically undergone a series of reconstructive surgeries by which she will totally transform her face. Entitled, 'The Reincarnation of St. Orlan' each 'performance' since 1990 is an actual surgical operation designed to alter a specific facial feature and bring it into conformity with some art historically-defined criteria of beauty. According to art critic Barbara Rose:

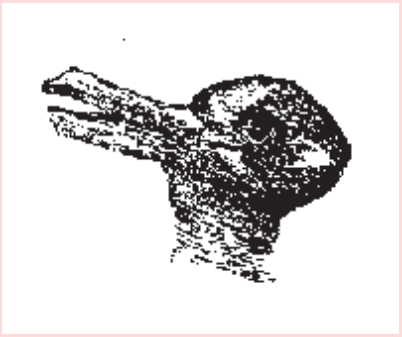
'Supplying surgeons with computer-generated images of the nose of a famous, unattributed School of Fountainebleau sculpture of Diana, the mouth of Boucher's Europa, the forehead of Leonardo's Mona Lisa, the chin of Botticelli's Venus and the eyes of Gerome's Psyche as guides to her transformation, Orlan also decorates the operating rooms with enlarged reproductions of the relevant details from these same works'[20]

Orlan's goal is not to be beautiful, but rather 'to represent an ideal formulated by male desire' as she 'uses her body as a medium of transformation . . . to deconstruct mythological images of women.'[21] Orlan's guides are paintings by past male artists; she creates the ultimate collaborative self-portrait: not with paint, but with a scalpel and the help of specialized surgeons.[22] In true 1990's style, she calls her work 'techno-art.' [23] She claims her goal is to show that no woman can ever attain a male-defined ideal of beauty and therefore, all attempts are futile. Her art is meant to discourage women from wrong-intentioned surgery.

The still photographs that serve as documents of videotaped performances such as 'Omnipresence' (Orlan's seventh operation: November 21, 1993) form fascinating compositions of lights and darks, body parts and surgical instruments, that are at first glance somewhat indecipherable. They are like ambiguous images: difficult to read. Once deciphered, most viewers are incredulous as to their grisly realism.[24] Initially repelled by the blood and gore depicted in these photos, viewers tend to identify with Orlan to some degree or other, explainable in a variety of ways. Some may empathize with the pain she is apparently enduring (until learning she has undergone epidural anaesthesia) while some may assume a physically-charged male gaze that implies domination and possession. Women viewers in particular may identify with her as the object of the masculine gaze, sympathizing with her goal 'to represent an ideal formulated by male desire' since they care greatly about whether they conform to prevailing standards of beauty. Insofar as any of these viewers identify with the work, they take an interest in it. To the degree that their interest is self-conscious and self-directed, it becomes an interested stance. According to feminist theories advocating an interested stance, such viewers are correctly and fully experiencing the work. But according to the legacy of philosophical notions of disinterestedness, these viewers should block any empathy felt for the artist and attempt to experience the art disinterestedly. Is this possible and if so, how might this be accomplished?

I believe it is not only possible but also advisable. I would like to explore a position that lies somewhere between the two extremes: the traditional endorsement of masculinist disinterestedness on the one hand and its feminist antithesis on the other. What I suggest here is a bit of 'gender treason' -- a term borrowed from discussions of feminist pedagogy and defined as 'the simultaneous endorsement of both authority and freedom, order and flexibility, objectivity and subjectivity, and reason and feeling.' [25] I will argue that although the adoption of a stance of traditional disinterestedness is a masculinst approach to the experiencing of a work of art, it is still a possible and appropriate, useful mode of experiencing art, including feminist art when reconfigured along revisionist lines. What I call Interested Attention (IA) may persist only for the duration of one's initial encounter. It may last for the first few seconds, or it may come later. It may be interspersed with brief moments or long intervals of what I will call Disinterested Attention (DA). The 'toggle' between the two types of attention might be deliberate or not. In any case, one cannot 'see' with both types of attention at once. One either experiences the work with IA or DA. This is analogous to a person switching between seeing the duck and seeing the rabbit in the well-known duck-rabbit drawing.[26]

Sometimes one intends to switch from reading it one way to the other and is successful. At other times, no matter how strongly one attempts to switch, one is not successful. Finally, there are times when one finds the switch occuring involuntarily, in spite of an attempt to focus on the duck or the rabbit exclusively.

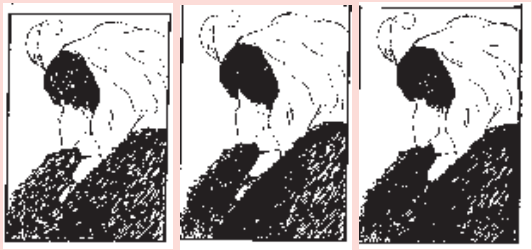


Joseph Jastrow 1900 Duck-Rabbit Drawing from Henry Gleitman Psychology *(New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1981)*

Although he was not commenting on such a picture in particular, Hume's observations on one's initial encounter with a work of art are worth noting:

'There is a flutter or hurry of thought which attends the first perusal of any piece, and which confounds the genuine sentiment of beauty. The relation of the parts is not discerned; The true characters of style are little distinguished: The several perfections and defects seem wrapped up in a species of confusion, and present themselves indistinctly to the imagination.' [27]

Clearly a duck-rabbit picture does not present us with as much 'confusion' as a more complicated work of art like a photograph of an incision of Orlan's face since there are only two choices: the duck and the rabbit. But the analogy is worth pursuing. Current theories of the psychology of perception utilize ambiguous images to demonstrate the same point: that there is what Hume called a 'flutter or hurry of thought' that confuses and confounds one's cognitive processing of the image in a work of art. Moreover, what one expects to see can often affect what one does see.



From Left to Right : Fig 2A : Fig 2B : Fig 2C - , E. G. Boring, 1930 from Henry Gleitman Psychology *(1981)*

Take another recognizable ambiguous figure: the well-known old woman/young woman illustration (Fig. 2A).[28] According to the perceptual construction hypothesis, a viewer's choice of seeing an image one way or another depends upon the perceptual organization she chooses, i.e., the context. This context may be within the stimulus pattern itself or it may be 12 provided by the subject's expectations. If a viewer has been shown a less ambiguous image of the young woman (Fig. 2B) before viewing the ambiguous one, she is more likely to see the latter as the young woman rather than the old. Similarly, if she has been shown a less ambiguous image of the old

woman (Fig. 2C) before viewing the original ambiguous one, she is more likely to see the latter as the old woman rather than the young. Far from being passive receptors of external stimuli, our sensory systems 'actively transform their stimulus inputs.'[29] Visual patterns are constructions created by the perceived and the perception of patterns is heavily affected by experience and expectations.

It is said that we are typically unaware of our mental sets; we can be predisposed toward one particular perceptual organization without knowing that we are. But surely it is possible to also deliberately manipulate the awareness we have of our mental sets. One's initial confusion upon encountering a work of art is a preliminary configuring of our mental set to construct both a pattern and an interpretation from what is perceived. Some parts of this process are under our control. Seeing a still photograph out of its original context -- a videotape of the surgical process – a viewer of a single image documenting Orlan's 'Omnipresence' scrambles to clarify the ambiguities of what is seen. she may be confused at first since freeze- framing the action is not usually the way performances are viewed. But as documents of a performance, they are often studied as individual still shots, and upon encountering such an image, she may attend disinterestedly to the image and ask, 'What am I seeing?' Recognizing what the forms and colors depict, the more pressing question becomes whether one can actually believe what one's seeing (thinking that perhaps it's only a computer-generated image). Once verified as a photographic document of real surgery, a viewer (as noted earlier) might empathize with the artist: either by imagining the pain and discomfort of the procedure or, in the case of female viewers, by sympathizing with the need to aspire toward some socially prescribed ideal of beauty. A quick reminder that the image is a work of art and not just a picture of someone's cosmetic surgery might cause another reversal, this time a disengagement with the rapport one has established – a reversal of personal interest – to an intellectual engagement with the content of the work of art. In keeping with the legacy of conceptual art of the 1960s, this engagement with the work of art as art would involve the recognition of Orlan's goal to deconstruct mythological images of women plus the contemplation of herself as the represention of an ideal 'formulated by male desire.' This final phase (although the possibility of toggling between IA and DA still remains) embodies the revisionist notion of DA sketched earlier: one that attempts to capture what it means to engage intellectually and disengage emotionally with the work of art. Similar though not wholly adoptive of eighteenth century conceptions of disinterestedness, it encourages attending with a dismissal of as many interests or prejudices as possible, with the full realization that -- try as one might – we cannot be pure, unflawed mirrors that reflect the work.

The important point is that the experience and concomitant effect of the work of art rely upon input from both modes of attention, each with its own conceptual framework. After all, one can look at an image of a nude female body with DA by attending – as best as possible -- to its color, texture and overall balance as well as

viewing it with a possessing or objectifying male gaze (IA). A viewer's contextual structuring is analogous to wearing different glasses or lenses that affect one's vision; switching and adding mental sets is like changing one's lenses or wearing multiple lenses. One can view representations with a gendered lens, a raced lens, or any other designated lens, but one cannot view and interpret an image with no lens at all. Thus, there is no pure disinterested stance; there is only something approximating it. Donning a lens of formal appreciation and intellectual analysis -- voluntarily or not -- strips away as many of the lenses as one is capable of discarding.[30]

There is recent evidence that shows that similarity plays an important role in deciding between incompatible readings. In an experiment in which subjects were given incompatible 14 visual contextual clues before interpreting an ambiguous picture, properties were attributed to the picture based on whether it was being compared with one or the other even if the interpretations yielded were mutually exclusive. It was the context of comparison (or the comparison class) that determined the mental set for the processing of the picture based on similarity.

For instance, an ambiguous pronged figure could be interpreted as possessing three or four prongs, depending on whether the right-most protrusion is considered to be part of the base or a prong[31] [Fig. 3A] When a subject viewed an unambiguous three- pronged version [Fig. 3B], it influenced the reading of the ambiguous figure as three- pronged. When s/he viewed an unambiguous four-pronged figure [Fig. 3C], it influenced the reading of the ambiguous figure as four-pronged. Similarity played a key role in influencing the predispositional mental set that affected the resultant interpretation.

Reconsider the ambiguous figures of the old woman/young woman and the duck/rabbit. As already noted, when provided with a disambiguated visual clue, viewers tended to interpret the ambiguous figure of the woman based on its similarity to the given clue. In the case of the duck/rabbit, a discussion of one animal or the other affected the interpretation of the ambiguous image, again based on similarity. The sensory contexts enabled viewers to choose between two incompatible interpretations. Incompatible interpretations were considered viable and there was clearly no problem vacillating between them as long as the two were not considered simultaneously. I would like to suggest that the same possibility holds with vacillating between the mutually incompatible approaches of DA and IA.

Extrapolating from the results of these experiments, I would suggest that the reason Arnheim and others viewing with a male gaze find themselves initially responding with interest in a physical, eroticized way to the nude body in 'La Source' and perhaps even to the bruised and bloody face of Orlan is that their initial response is similar to their unambiguous sexualized predispositions. In confronting the images of nude body and bloody face, they scramble to sort through the confusion of interpretations in much the same way as do viewers of more trivial ambiguous images. In these cases, like the more trivial cases of duck/rabbit and old woman/

young woman, the resulting interpretations are mutually exclusive yet viable provided they are not held at one and the same time. What is taking place is a deliberate dis-ing of the gazer's tendency to use, take advantage of, desire, or possess the girl that is pictured; it is an attempt to be open to receiving all the impressions that the work can provide. It is a shift toward the eighteenth century concept of disinterestedness, which is clearly a denial of Arnheim's initial and intrusive interests: an attraction to the work's sensuality singularly 'locked' within (the forbidden femininity). To say that images and works of art 'yield' impressions is to misconstrue the process and to philosophically rely on precedent and the weight of tradition; both Alison in the eighteenth century and Stolnitz in the twentieth were incorrect to emphasize the art object and its potential to yield impressions (as if the possibilities were simply there for the taking by passive percipients). However Arnheim, for example, self-consciously reconfigures his mental set to perform 'an abstraction/subtraction' on the nude body under his gaze in order to attain some form of DA, thus adding to his experiences of the painting. In striving to become an impure, flawed mirror, (remember there is no pure, unflawed mirror and hence, no pure DA), he is more open to all the impressions that the work might provide. From this exercise we learn how to attend disinterestedly to art.

But - in switching to a disinterested stance - can one be said to be fully experiencing the work of art? Certainly not. Large components of the significance and the meaning of art are blocked by the assumption of DA. But they may be retrieved through the imaginative exercise of IA. Can a viewer -- male or female -- who is conditioned to view the image of a woman with a male gaze reconfigure his/her mental set yet again to allow for an interpretation that is similar to a feminist interpretation, viz., that the girl on display is embarassed by her nakedness, is outraged by being reduced to body parts on display for (clothed) male viewers, is feeling exploited and abused at the expense of male pleasure? Succeeding at this reading of the image may count as 'adding' a context instead of subtracting. In any case, it constitutes a deliberate building (not dis-ing)of interest in the nude body on display: a clear case of IA with a feminist lens. Changing lenses would enable one to

From Left to Right : Fig. 3A : Fig 3B : Fig 3C , from Henry Gleitman Psychology *(1981)*

be open to more impressions than ever before, although a viewer might admittedly prefer some to others.Finally, this extensive detour through IA, DA, and then IA(s) again, provides a model for the feminist who is committed to the goal of expanding viewers' reactions to art. The feminist viewer of Ingres' nude or Orlan's surgeries -- whose tendency is to adopt a more physically and bodily based interested stance (IA) like Arnheim's -- may also benefit from the lesson of undergoing an intellectualizing and abstracting process. Like the viewer with the male gaze, who undergoes a radical shift by learning to view with a feminist lens, the feminist who looks upon Ingres' nude formalistically is self- consciously and deliberately shedding her feminist lens to view the work as disinterestedly as possible. Viewing 'La Source' in terms of geometry and color adds to the variety of experiences she gains from the piece. Again, such shedding of lenses might arise involuntarily or it may become an habitual, learned practice.[32]

One final question still needs to be answered. Granted, a feminist can jump between IA and DA when viewing women in Hitchcock films and Ingres' paintings, but can she do so when the image in question is intentionally feminist? Leaving aside the complications philosophers are prone to raise when dealing with artists' intentions, suffice it to say for the purpose of this investigation that Orlan has been up front about the feminist intent of her art and more than one feminist art critic has sanctioned 'The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan' as feminist. (In this case, the well-known art critic Barbara Rose.) I do not foresee the mental exercise required of a viewer (any viewer, but more particularly, a feminist viewer) to be any different in kind from the types of reconfigurations mentioned above on the part of a critic like Arnheim or the feminist viewer of Ingres' nude girl. The adoption of a Revised Disinterested mode of Attention might be more challenging with difficult political art, but only in the level of exertion required and not in the type. Switching from feminist IA to DA with regard to feminist art is still an exercise in subtracting the context. In the case of Orlan, it is a deliberate shift toward viewing bloody facial features as combinations of reds and purples, darks and lights, and a shift to reflection on the concept of women and of art exploited by the performance series. The former switch is in fact, at the heart of every feminist analysis of the formal properties of women's quilts, the composition of the vaginal iconography of Judy Chicago's 'The Dinner Party' and Cindy Sherman's recent photographs of maimed mannekins and bloody body parts.[33]

Works of art can yield multiple, even conflicting, sorts of experiences. But we must give them the chance to do so by encouraging ourselves to be open to all the impressions such a representation might yield. We may not be pure, unflawed mirrors, but we are mirrors whose cognitive mechanisms function, at least in part, on perceived similarities between our mental sets and what we disambiguate. One of the most laudatory aspects of art is its ability to make us look within: at our inner selves, our predispositions, our mental sets. We can attempt to be neutral and

objective, in the spirit of the traditional notion of disinterestedness, while recognizing that a revised notion of DA is not co-extensive with that notion.

Notes

1. Some political art is also activist art especially when the art intends to convey an ideological message or motivation. For a defense of the work of Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Adrian Piper against charges by art critic Donald Kuspit, see my essay, 'Revising the Aesthetic-Nonaesthetic Distinction: The Aesthetic Value of Activist Art,' in *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics*, co-edited by Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Penn State Press, 1995) pp. 245-272

2. From Francis Hutcheson 'An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue' reprinted in George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (eds.) *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977) p. 573

3. Edmund Burke *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* ed. J. T. Boulton (London, 1958) p. 115

4. Archibald Alison *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* 5th ed., (London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1817) p. 71

5. David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste' in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* (1977) p. 600.

6. Jerome Stolnitz, 'Of the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'' originally published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Winter, 1961), 131-143, reprinted in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, (1977) p.618

7. Rudolf Arnheim *Visual Thinking* (University of California Press, 1969) p. 37

8. Rudolf Arnheim *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (University of California Press, 1964) p. 1 17.

9. Ibid

10. Ibid p. 120.

11. Arnheim *Visual Thinking* p. 38.

12. Katy Deepwell (ed) *New Feminist Art Criticism* (Manchester University Press, 1995) p. 8. Deepwell refers to Christine Battersby's critique of Kantian aesthetics in 'Situating the Aesthetic: A Feminist Defence,' in A. Benjamin and P. Osborne (eds.) *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics* (London, ICA, (Philosophical Forum), 1991) p. 31 -44.

13. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Indiana University Press, 1989) pp. 14-26; originally published in *Screen* (Autumn, 1975)

14. Ibid. p. 25

15. The heroes include the policeman in *Vertigo*, the dominant male possessing money and power in Marnie, and the photo-journalist whose sole enterprise is the viewing of others through a camera lens, in particular a woman in another apartment in *Rear Window*.

16. Laura Mulvey 'Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by Duel in the Sun,' *Visual and Other Pleasures* p. 33; reprinted from *Framework* (Summer, 1981).

17. Art historians such as Griselda Pollock have extended this analysis to painting. See her *Vision and Difference: Femininity. Feminism and the Histories of Art*(New York: Routledge, 1988) p. 20

18. bell hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,' *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* pp. 149-150; originally published in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992) pp. 115-31. hooks laments the slow increase in the number of black critics writing about art in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995).

19. For an account of the dynamics of whites assuming black face and vice versa, see Susan Gubar's *Racechanges: White Skin. Black Face in American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1 997)

20. Barbara Rose, 'Is it Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Act' *Art in America* 81, 2 (February, 1993), pp. 82-87, 125. See also Kathy Davis "My Body is My Art' Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Utopia?' *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 4, 1 (February, 1 997) pp. 23-37

21. Ibid p. 84

22. She remains awake to orchestrate her performances. During one surgery, which was broadcast live to several galleries around the world, she answered faxes from viewers. One can purchase videos of her performances as well as ceremonial containers containing a 'relic' of her flesh. She is currently represented by the Sandra Gering Gallery in New York.

23. Orlan interviewed in 'The Doyenne of Divasection,' by Miryam Sas, *Mondo* 2000, 13 (January, 1995) pp. 106-11 1.

24. A particularly shocking image is one that shows the skin of her face being lifted away from her cheek structure below, pictured on the cover of Parveen Adams' collection of essays, *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996). This, and related images, form the content of Adams' essay, 'Operation Orlan' pp. 1 40-159.

25. Sara Munson Deats and Langretta Tallen Lenker (eds.), *Gender and Academe: Feminist Pedagogy and Politics* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1994) p. xxiv.

26. The duck-rabbit figure was first used in 1900 by Joseph Jastrow. See Henry Gleitman, *Psychology* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1981) p.231.

27. David Hume, 'Of The Standard of Taste: From Four Dissertations,' in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* 2nd ed., (1989) p. 248.

28. Formerly referred to as the 'Wife/Mistress' figure, it dates from 1930, the work of E. G. Boring. See Gleitman, *Psychology* p. 252. Gleitman labels Figures 2B and 2C 'unambiguous' but I have called them 'less ambiguous' since they are sometimes difficult to interpret as either an unambiguously young or old woman in spite of the visual clues: the prominent eyelash of the young woman (in profile on the left side of the face) in Fig. 2B and the more prominent ear-as-eye on the right side of the face of the old woman in Fig. 2C.

29. See, for instance, the theories of Julian Hochberg and Ulric Neisser in Gleitman *Psychology* p. 246

30. This is similar to E. H. Gombrich's claim 'the innocent eye is a myth' except for the fact that Gombrich never suggested gender or race as part of a viewer's mental makeup, opting instead for more general categories of 'fears, guesses, expectations which sort and model the incoming messages, testing and transforming and testing again.' See *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton University Press, 1960) p. 298.

31. D. Medin, R. Goldstone, and D. Gentner 'Respects For Similarity' *Psychological Review* 100, 2 (1993), 254-278. (I have changed the letters of the figures from the original article in order to have them conform with the previous convention from Gleitman's *Psychology* of Fig. A designating the ambiguous image.) It might be noteworthy to add that the authors of this essay were inspired by Nelson Goodman's claims about similarity; 'he called similarity 'invidious, insidious, a pretender, an imposter, a quack'.' (p. 254)

32. I hasten to add that some feminist critics and theorists would reject this suggestion. Andrea Dworkin and Susanne Kappeler, for example, claim that it is impossible for them to look at images of nude women in any way other than through a feminist lens. see Andrea Dworkin *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Perigree Book, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979) and Susanne Kappeler *The Pornography of Representation* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Kappeler specifically denounces feminists who are 'busy rescuing a female artist,' for example, Judy Chicago and her immense project, *The Dinner Party* . Her complaint is that 'The overriding stumbling block here is art -- to be rescued at all costs, and to be filled up, moreover, by a quota of women.' (p. 39)

33. In fact, Laura Mulvey speaks of a similar process with regard to Cindy Sherman's photographs which she calls an 'oscillation effect . . . between reverence and revulsion.' See 'Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977-87,' in *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 75-76. The essay was originally published as 'A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body. The Work of Cindy Sherman,' in *New Left Review* (July/August 1991).

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