

The ASA Feminist Caucus Committee A Brief History written on the 30th anniversary of its founding

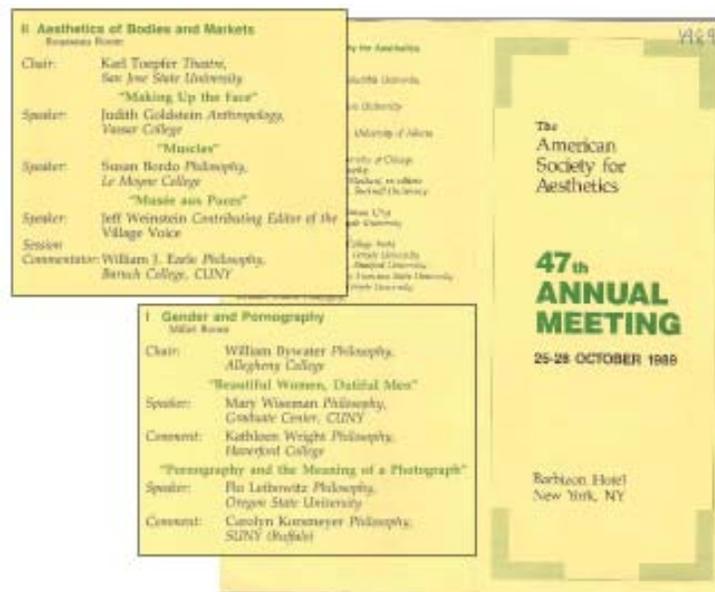
The Feminist Caucus Committee of the American Society for Aesthetics marks its thirtieth anniversary at the annual meeting in November 2020. Since even recent history is quickly forgotten, this account seeks to record the formation of this caucus and a few of its noteworthy events.

Some prehistory:

Feminist work in aesthetics was a relative latecomer to the discipline, in contrast to related fields such as literature, film studies, and art history, where feminist scholarship was notable as early as the 1970s. Even in philosophy, feminist perspectives in epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science, and ethics, had begun to appear in the late 1970s and early 80s. However, only one book in aesthetics, Gisela Ecker's anthology, *Feminist Aesthetics* (a collection of essays translated from German) was on North American library shelves by 1985.

To redress this gap, those who attended national meetings of the ASA began to organize sessions around feminist issues. These events included both regular ASA members and invitations to scholars outside of philosophy, with the expectation that broadening disciplinary perspectives might jumpstart new approaches to aesthetics. The earliest of these was in [1985: a panel on Feminist Interpretation](#). Several presentations on eroticism appeared in [1986](#), including one speaker on dance.

[In 1987 a session on Feminist Theory and Aesthetics](#) was presented, followed by another on [Feminist Aesthetics in 1988](#) in conjunction with The Canadian Society for Aesthetics. The [1989 annual meeting featured two panels: "Aesthetics of Bodies and Markets" and "Gender and Pornography."](#)



To sustain the momentum of this new work, the Feminist Caucus was formed to encourage further feminist thinking in aesthetics, not only for the sake of scholarship but also to support increased diversity of participants in the ASA.

Formation of the Caucus:

The Feminist Caucus began at the annual meeting in 1990 held in Austin, Texas. Its purpose was, first, to insure greater gender balance within the ASA: more women in attendance at annual meetings and more feminist topics on ASA programs. Other goals included: more women on the Board of Trustees, more graduate students at the annual meetings, more diverse topics published in the *JAAC*, discussion of feminist pedagogy in relation to the teaching of traditional aesthetics, mentoring young feminists in the field, and eventually – more multidisciplinary approaches, the inclusion of more diverse attendees, and increased international scope. According to existing sign-up sheets, attendees at that first meeting were: Phil Alperson (who would later edit the *JAAC*), Annette Barnes, Arnold Berleant (a former Secretary-Treasurer), Peg Brand, Joyce Brodsky, Renee Cox, Mary Devereaux, Sarah Fowler, Judith Genova, Lydia Goehr, Tim Gould, Kathleen Higgins, Gregg Horowitz, Tom Huhn, Michael Krausz, Jo Ellen Jacobs, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Flo Leibowitz, Paul Mattick, Mary Mothersill, Daniel Nathan, Monique Roelofs, Yuriko Saito, Barbara Sandrissler, Roger Shiner (ASA Secretary-Treasurer), Richard Shusterman, Anita Silvers, and Mary Wiseman. Subsequent meetings were held every year and were open to all interested; attendance remains fairly large, averaging 35-45 participants at the annual lunch gatherings.

The following statement of purpose was approved by the Board of Trustees and distributed to the organization in 1993:

The ASA Feminist Caucus was established as a forum for discussion of feminist issues and to encourage the ASA to include in the JAAC and at its meetings those issues generally labelled “feminist aesthetics”. Since there is considerable diversity among those who consider themselves feminists as to what constitutes feminism and feminist aesthetics, membership in the feminist caucus is unrestricted. Inasmuch as some members of the Caucus will find that they share similar views of feminism and feminist aesthetics, the Caucus steering committee encourages these members to form subcommittees devoted to their common enterprise and invites them to report back to the Caucus on their projects and activities at the annual meeting of the ASA.

The role of the Caucus within the ASA is pedagogical, political, and theoretical. Its aim is to introduce the general membership to issues in feminist aesthetics and to give them an opportunity for deeper understanding of this area. Inasmuch as the Caucus has several members on the ASA Board of Trustees, as well as an “ombudsman” to represent members of the Caucus to the Board and to other professional bodies, the Caucus serves as an additional resource to protect women against discrimination within the profession.

The Caucus will hold a luncheon meeting each year at the national meeting of the ASA. At this meeting members will receive reports from the committees and subcommittees of

the caucus, and have the opportunity to initiate new projects and subcommittees. This meeting will also provide a venue in which issues raised by feminist scholarship can be discussed. As these topics become mainstream and the teaching of feminist aesthetics more widespread, the continued existence of the caucus may be submitted for review. Its retention as a body to deal with grievances and specific disputes may be desirable even after a separate identity is no longer at issue.

(The last item has been superseded by the recent adoption by the ASA of Policies on Discrimination, Harassment, and Respectful Behavior. The FCC remains a place for informal discussion of problems encountered in the ASA and other professional organizations.)

Judging from the programs of ASA meetings for the next several years, the attention given to feminism by the formation of the Caucus spurred immediate results. The [1991 meeting in Portland](#) saw a presentation on Laura Mulvey's famous notion of the 'male gaze', and a feminist reading of Dewey; there was a symposium on Cavell focusing on Gender, Film, and Theory; and a plenary session on Feminism and Gender. 1991 was the first year the Caucus held its annual Brown Bag Lunch.

At the 1992 meeting, which commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the ASA, there were five papers distributed throughout [the program](#) on feminist subjects as well as an invited plenary featuring artist and philosopher Adrian Piper and a session with performance artist Carmelita Tropicana. Meetings throughout the 1990s similarly contained a wealth of feminist programming, both in special sessions and individual presentations; sometimes these were combined with panels emphasizing multicultural perspectives on art. The latter featured topics such as African-American spirituals, Catawba Indian pottery, and tribal arts. The 1993 meeting included sessions on censorship as well as Japanese and Chinese erotic art ([1993](#)); the following year, black feminist author bell hooks delivered the plenary on the topic "Beauty Laid Bare" ([1994](#)). In [1995](#), a Feminist Caucus session discussed the question, "Must feminist aesthetics be based on a theory of difference, and must the theory of difference be exclusionary?" The next year topics included "Teaching Aesthetics from a Feminist Perspective" and international perspectives with Hilary Robinson from Ireland and Katy Deepwell from England, who joined Shelly Hornstein (Canada) and Cynthia Freeland (US). (Deepwell—author, curator, and critic—launched a feminist online art journal *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* in 1996; the interdisciplinary journal ran twenty years and recently made [all its articles available online](#).)

The Santa Fe meeting in [1997](#) hosted a conversation with plenary speaker artist Judy Chicago (Belen, New Mexico) and art critic Lucy Lippard (Galisteo), included a second plenary with the director of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, and also featured Native American Tewa Dancers. The [1998](#) meeting on the Indiana University Bloomington campus featured a session on the female body in art, a Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction session on the kiss, and a demonstration of dance with a discussion chaired by the late Selma Jeanne Cohen, founding editor of *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*. The [1999](#) meeting included two sessions on beauty and a poetry reading by Linda Pastan, author of *The Five Stages of Grief*.

Obviously, feminist scholarship in aesthetics also was developing outside of ASA meetings. In 1990 the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* published a special issue on "Feminism and

Tradition in Aesthetics,” co-edited by Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer. (An earlier special issue, edited by Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer, appeared in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* in 1990.) The *JAAC* issue and its subsequent expanded publication as an anthology in 1995 presented not only work by Caucus members but also contributions from feminist artists, including filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha and Adrian Piper. Beth Ann Dobie’s essay, “Interweaving Feminist Frameworks,” included examples of the work of artist Nancy Spero, who generously contributed images both for the journal and the book cover, and who (it was later revealed) had been one of the original Guerilla Girls.

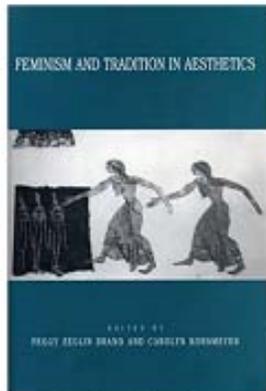
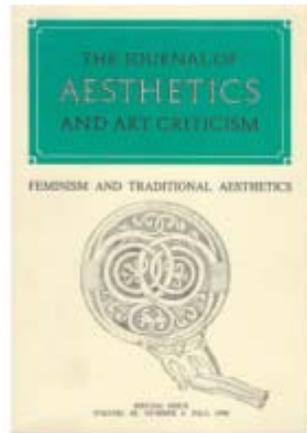


Image from Nancy Spero, Athena and Aegina (1991)



Self-portrait of Clarissa, illustrator and nun, medieval manuscript

Cynthia Freeland published early work on feminism and film theory in 1998, including "Feminist Philosophy of Film," in *Blackwell's Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, and "Feminist Film Theory," in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. In 2004 Carolyn Korsmeyer brought out *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*.

Increasingly, sessions began to integrate feminist issues with analyses of race, as with a [2002](#) presentation in Miami by Eleanor Heartney, an art critic and contributing editor to *Art in America*, who spoke on “Bodies, Beauty, and Burqas,” on the work of a range of artists from Japan, China, Korea, and several Islamic countries. [2002](#) also included a session titled “Surgical Art” that included a practicing cosmetic surgeon discussing beauty norms. The [2003](#) meeting in San Francisco featured a panel on Race, Gender and Aesthetics, as well as a Caucus discussion of “the ornament,” ornamentalism and Orientalism.

Scheduled sessions explicitly titled “feminist” dropped off after 2003, although interest continued to develop. Several Caucus lunch meetings featured roundtable discussions on such subjects as a panel that queried “What is the Future of Feminist Art in a Post-feminist Age?” ([2007](#)). That year also saw a special session on “Aesthetic Imaginaries of Race: Cosmopolitanism, Beauty, and the Colonial Encounter.” A panel at the [2004](#) ASA in Houston featured Houston artists that included speakers Soody Sharifi, James Nakagawa, and Benny Flores Ansell speaking on their digital photographic work on race, ethnicity, and gender. In [2008](#), in addition to a panel on “Feminist Aesthetics,” the Hampshire College Art Gallery was the venue for a show of Peg Brand’s “feminist parodies” series of paintings, “Picture Yourself Here.”



Caption: From l to r, David Davies, Stephanie Ross, Jenefer Robinson, and Kathy Higgins emplaced within Peg Brand's versions of, respectively, *Desmoiselles d'Avignon*, *Olympia*, *Woman I*, and *Judith*.

Even with meetings where there are no sessions labeled “feminist,” there is clearly a wide interest in subjects related to gender and power, as well as to the human body and its variations. These subjects have included discussions of ‘sexiness’ as an aesthetic trait (Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin); race and standards of beauty; and the varieties of body types including the representation of the body in contemporary Chinese art (2009). These topics have been amplified in essays contained in three volumes: Peg Brand, *Beauty Matters* (2000) and *Beauty Unlimited* (2012); and Sherri Irvin, *Body Aesthetics* (2016). The subject of pornography also (obviously) engages issues of sex and the body (Anne Eaton, Andrew Kania; in 2015 Hans Maes and Jerrold Levinson edited *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays*.)

In general, ASA programs have expanded areas of interest regarding race, gender and sexuality, global arts, and the political consciousness that these topics demand. Much of this activity also grows out of another ASA committee, the Diversity Committee (established in 2009). Membership in the Feminist Caucus Committee and the Diversity Committee substantially overlaps, and the research undertaken by members often converges. (Dan Flory published *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* in 2008; Monique Roelofs edited a special issue of *Contemporary Aesthetics* on “Aesthetics and Race: New Philosophical Perspectives” in 2009; Paul C. Taylor authored *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* in 2016; Charles Peterson and Anne Eaton edited a special issue of *JAAC* on aesthetics and race in 2019.)

At the 2010 meeting in Victoria, B.C., which marked the 20th anniversary of the Caucus formation, there was an informal poster display of work on gender and aesthetics. A few pictures from this event can be seen [here](#). [LINK TO IMAGES IN GROUP A.] Five years later, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Feminist Caucus (now renamed the Feminist Caucus Committee so as to conform to designation of other ASA groups), an all-day workshop was held at the Savannah meeting. Three sessions on History, Feminist Scholarship Today, and Pedagogy attracted many participants and a revolving audience. The program for this lengthy session appears below. A summary report appeared in the [ASA Newsletter 36:2 \(Summer 2016\), pp. 8-9](#),

and some of the posters prepared for the event can be seen [here](#). [LINK TO IMAGES IN GROUP B.]



Since that celebration, more recent ASA programs have included regular panels sponsored by the Feminist Caucus on an array of topics, including “Subversive Humor” (2016), “Art and Aesthetics in The Global Women’s March” (2017), “Philosophy & Aesthetics: Then and Now: In Honour of Kate Millet and Linda Nochlin” (2018), and “Intersectional Aesthetics” (2019).

Anniversaries are both occasions for retrospective evaluation and prompters for new and sustained ideas. The American Society for Aesthetics announced the establishment of a one-time [prize funded by a gift from Peg Brand Weiser in 2020 to commemorate the 30th anniversary](#) of the founding of the Feminist Caucus Committee, by giving recognition to a published feminist aesthetics essay. The winner was Sherri Irvin for her 2017 publication in *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, "Resisting Body Oppression: An Aesthetic Approach," the focus of a session at the November 2020 annual meeting. Honorable Mention was awarded to Alia Al-Saji for her essay, "Glued to the Image: A Critical Phenomenology of Racialization through Works of Art," published in the Special Issue of *JAAC* on Aesthetics and Race (2019). The 2020 FCC session— "No Place Like Her"—included panelists Guerrilla Girl Käthe Kollwitz, feminist curator Maura Reilly, and regular ASA members Sue Spaid and Rossen Ventzislavov. The Guerilla Girls has subsequently placed a copy of the recorded session in their archives.

Let’s hope that in future years we will see the development of additional and amplified perspectives that further our understanding of gender, race, and social and cultural diversity in the arts and in aesthetics.

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Photos of 2010 poster session and of 2008 “Picture Yourself Here” exhibit courtesy of Cynthia Freeland.

A bibliography of philosophical feminist aesthetics can be found in Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Feminist Aesthetics,” [*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*](#).

-November 28, 2020