

The Difference Between Men and Women, Makeup and Stalinists in Skirts:

An Interview with Annie Le Brun¹

Catherine David:² When all is said and done, what is the difference between a man and a woman?

Annie Le Brun: This is the type of question that makes me want to respond: of course, the difference *between* them! Nevertheless, since people brandish this difference all the time these days, I will recall this remark by Georges Bataille: “No doubt the female state of being is less unstable than the state of a body: it is only a difference of degree. The woman who attracts me isn’t any less a man than water isn’t ice.”³ This evokes, on the one hand, the existence in each being of a fundamental bisexuality in which certain traits do or do not predominate; and, on the other hand, the extreme flexibility [*mouvance*] of this difference. For me it is ridiculous to deny the difference between men and women or to fix it in place. Today’s feminists are ridiculous because they don’t fail to claim to be indifferent as to whether this difference exists or not, according to the needs of their arguments. In any case, it seems to me just as absurd to believe that men have a monopoly on masculinity as it is to believe that women have a monopoly on femininity. It is a matter of distribution, a tendency, but certainly not a monopoly.

Q: You claim that you’ve escaped the consequences of the biological accident that made you a woman. But what are you, if you are not a woman? An imp? A pure spirit?

A: First and foremost, I am an animal and sometimes an animal that thinks. And it is precisely the fact that I think doesn’t make things as simple as people want to make us believe these days. At least concerning the famous difference between the sexes. Because people forget too easily that our bisexuality manifests itself both

¹ Excerpts from *être une femme: Annie Le Brun: Entretien avec Catherine David*, *Playboy* #56, July 1978. Reprinted in *Vagit-prop, Lâchez tout et autres textes* (Paris: éditions Ramsay/Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1990). Translated from the French by NOT BORED! 8 January 2019. The new title and all the footnotes by the translator.

² I’m not sure if “Catherine David” refers to the French writer born in 1949 or the French art curator who was born in 1954, but I will try to find out.

³ Cf. *Critique*, April 1947.

really and symbolically. From which comes the continual dialectical tension that is the particularity [*le propre*] of thinking, from the tension that characterizes the fact of thinking as the movement that allows us to contemplate things that are opposites. By thinking, we already symbolically deny ourselves to the extent that thinking begins by being aware of the other. Thinking is a very troubled activity. When you start to think, you become androgynous.

[...]

Q: I don't believe that your head is empty . . . but you speak of the void and yet I am sure that you would be ready to praise makeup.

A: Each time a woman puts on makeup, she confronts and tries to resolve the contradiction (and the unbearable tension) between the misery of her reality and the erotic absolute that she would like to be. Even if she puts on her makeup very quickly, the activity takes place between nothing and everything. In this sense, makeup is more an admission than a lie. I know that these are paltry admissions, especially when you have nothing to admit, except that you are imitating the model proposed by some fashion magazine or relating to the characteristic type of one social class or another. But there are also magnificent admissions that are pure provocations: putting makeup on your breasts, for example. You know that there is nothing more provocative than artifice, displayed as such, because it is a manner of recalling the incompleteness around which all human enterprises are organized. So, I find it extremely courageous to put on makeup, to dare to illuminate a mere nothing [*le rien*]. But it is also a privilege because, with makeup, women can give themselves over to serious playfulness, while men, deprived of this form of the erotic imaginary, are constrained to play at being serious.

Q: In these times, it is difficult to choose between the upholders of traditional misogyny and those whom you call the "Stalinists in skirts."⁴ You walk a tightrope. But suppose people want to follow you on this road to nowhere. How can they do it if they aren't funambulists?

A: A little more than ten years ago, I wrote: "I don't know where I am going, but I know what I despise." On this point I absolutely haven't changed. In these conditions, it isn't surprising that I have as much scorn for the upholders of traditional misogyny as I do for the Stalinists in skirts, because both of them confine women into roles, even if these roles seem contradictory. The historical

⁴ Militant dogmatic feminists.

misfortune of femininity has precisely been having been confined in the straightjacket of roles. True feminine revolt consists in *deserting* the roles that the affirmation of a feminine specificity has justified. And so it happens that the self-proclaimed feminists of today, by frantically aligning themselves with that very feminine specificity, are beginning to once again lock femininity up in the prison of these roles, but this time under the pretext of liberation. A strange liberation, a new one that does not allow women to become what people have always refused to let them be: individuals. My opinion of women is too high to not suffer when I see them stick together in herds. I think you are either very optimistic or very naïve when you suppose in your question that, because certain avenues have become commonplace, they must lead somewhere, while the others must lead nowhere. Is it because someone announces in a loud voice that these avenues lead somewhere that they actually do? In any case, I don't like organized voyages because one is sure to arrive somewhere. I don't like to arrive; I like to leave.

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