Feminine Persuasion
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Preface

This catalog and the exhibit it covers, Feminine Persuasion, are part of our 2003 celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, by Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, and Paul H. Gebhard. That volume indicated an important shift in Alfred Kinsey’s understanding of women’s sexuality. When writing the male volume, published in 1948, he was still seeing the sexuality of women through 1940s male eyes. In the years that intervened between the two volumes, he was substantially influenced by a number of women scholars, including Emily Mudd, Alice Field, and Mary Calderone; in addition, he was confronted by his own data. His attempts, in the 1953 volume, to explain the striking differences he had documented between men and women, show him grappling with some important issues, not all of which he got right. I have no doubt that, if he had not died only three years after the female volume was published, he would have gone on to clarify these gender differences more correctly.

In the past fifty years in the United States, we have seen massive changes in the role of women in society, through education and employment; in the status of the traditional family, with increased divorce and substantial increases in less conventional family structures; and in the ability for women to control their own reproductive lives. All of this has been accompanied by changes in how women view and experience their own sexuality, reflecting a gradual lessening of the all-pervasive societal constraints on women’s sexual expression, which have prevailed, in various forms, through long episodes of our history.
At the present time we are in the midst of an interesting phase. The extraordinary impact of Viagra on the sexual lives of men and their partners has led inevitably to the search for a drug with comparable impact on the sexual lives of women. This has revealed the extent to which women’s sexuality and associated problems have been and continue to be conceptualized in male terms. The sexual lives of women are not going to be so easily transformed by a drug. Hopefully, though, in the process of a search for understanding, and through the controversy that has been provoked, we will end up with a better perception of women’s sexuality.

Feminine Persuasion, the exhibit and the book, along with the rest of our fiftieth anniversary celebration, will make an important contribution to the growing practice of looking at sexuality through women’s eyes, adding, in the process, to a practical understanding of sexuality that will benefit all women.

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