

the phenomenology of

SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

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THIS CREATIVE ARTS RESEARCH PROJECT strives to materialise sexual difference in sculpture, through a phenomenology of materials and abstracted form, to uncover a potential new paradigm of feminist art. A feminist phenomenology can be defined as exploring feminist issues through a continental philosophy framework. In this art practice it is actualised through studio based research and the creation of sculptural works that foreground feminist aesthetics and theory, in particular drawing on the work of Luce Irigaray.

Emerging in the early twentieth century as a philosophical force, firstly with Husserl, then later Merleau-Ponty and others, phenomenology foregrounds the interdependence of the self and its corporeality. Perceptions that emanate from below consciousness create meaning via our embodied responses to a work of art. The visual art tradition of phenomenology has historically focused on vision and its cognitive effects. More recently art's capacity to enact sensations and psychological affect is now being reconfigured through a materialist approach, foregrounding the agency of materials.¹ This essay will explore the lived experience of sexual difference through the sculptural installation *enmeshed*.²

The work is made of acrylic paint and rubber octopus straps arranged in patterns on the wall within the parameters of the existing architecture. The decorative effect echoes the wallpaper of an interior decor. A fleshy pink colour contrasts with the hard hooks and stretchy black rubber straps to create a tension between a comforting womb-like space and a menacing site of incarceration. Evolved from the lineage of Minimalism, *enmeshed* also draws on materiality, decoration and the handmade.

Minimalist art of the late 50s and 60s constituted a radical break from contemporary art of the time, as it relied heavily on the space in which the work of art was situated. In particular, it was sculpture that explored these external conditions, via the



2 Sculptural Installation by Caroline Phillips, exhibited at Craft, Melbourne, March 8 – April 27, 2013.

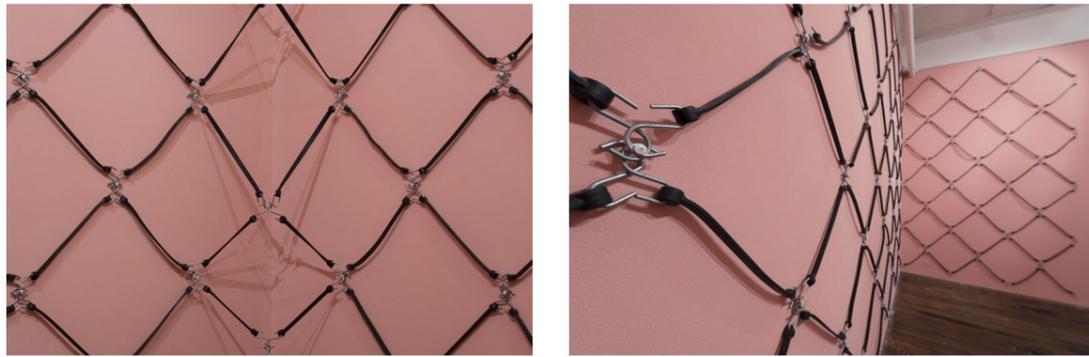
relationship between the work and the viewer. Developments that followed such as Post Minimalism and feminist art more fully explored the body and its sites of habitation.³ Feminist art now faces an impasse. Recurrent fields of contemporary feminist work such as representation, narrative and performance, however powerful, often problematise the reception of the work as their reading all too often falls within the limits of binary categories and hierarchical systems. In addition, the ongoing prevalence in contemporary feminist art's subject matter to depict female subjectivity preserves that status quo. Through a materially charged practice, this research seeks to traverse a wider terrain, the aesthetics of sexual difference, to ask the key question; is there a feminist phenomenology in sculpture today?

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray affirms the primacy of the body and its lived experience through the affirmation of "prediscursive experience", specifically the mother and child in utero (1991, 127). Critiquing Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, she argues that Merleau-Ponty neglects the specificity of the female body. Through her reading of the descriptive language used by Merleau-Ponty such as the "invisible of the prenatal life" (128) and metaphors of fluidity such as "watery sea" (128), she argues the maternal feminine is reduced to a restricted visibility, resulting in the privileging of the all seeing male (129). This equates, in Irigaray's view, to a binary, phallogocentric system.

Merleau-Ponty's relegation of the uterine experience to this state of blindness sets up Irigaray's contention that the very conditions for being, the conditions for vision

3 Ironically some claim that the demise of interest in phenomenology after the 1970's was due to feminist and poststructuralist theory (see Claire Bishop's, *Installation art, A critical history*, Tate Publishing, London, 2005); conversely, for others it is now seen as a renewed source for feminist theory (see Lisa Guenther's, 'Merleau-Ponty and the sense of sexual difference' in *Angelaki*, Vol 16, No.2, June, 2011).

1 For example the use of immersive light as seen in the work of Olafur Eliasson.



Above - Sculptural Installation by Caroline Phillips

and then language, are situated within this dark realm (Irigaray 1991, 141). Irigaray argues that Merleau-Ponty's text hence privileges the visual realm, relegating other senses to an implied (feminised) negativity (134). Following the logic that the uterine experience of warmth, moisture, softness, kinaesthesia and sound all come before vision and language, then it is touch, Irigaray asserts, that is the origin of meaning, through the specificity of the body (135). Elizabeth Grosz affirms the importance of the phenomenology of the maternal-feminine. In *Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh* she writes:

this darkness or invisibility of the 'dark continent' of maternity nevertheless conditions and makes possible vision and the visible: this darkness cannot simply be understood as the lack of light, the absence of vision, for it too is a positivity and not simply a lack. This invisible condition of existence is a tactile positivity (1999, 156).

Initially misread as an essentialist view, as with all of Irigaray's texts, her project is based on not only affirming the position of the feminine, but its relation to the other: two sexes in a co-existent relation. Through a sexuante, non-hierarchical approach, the irreducible male and female subjects are each formulated within specific, irreducible frameworks, with sexually different relationships to the maternal body and to their own. By rethinking this 'tactile positivity' through the production of art, this project seeks to challenge assumptions of what feminist aesthetics might be today and what constitutes a feminist practice. By means of gendered colour, pattern, and industrial materials metaphorically and conceptually enmeshed, the work explores surface, decoration and excess to posit an alternate, sexuante, feminist practice. As Irigaray argues:

Sexual difference would constitute the horizon of worlds more fecund than any known to date...and without reducing fecundity to the reproduction

of bodies and flesh...but also the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new *poetics* (1991, 7).

Initially the stimulus for the artwork comes from machine made, industrial materials (often purchased as factory off-cuts), then reworked by hand in the studio. This intention references tropes of the hand-made, making-do and thriftiness often associated with women and crafts and subverts associations of "naturalness". The fleshy pink tone on the walls imposes itself in stark contrast to the black of the rubber octopus straps. Irigaray speaks of the fluidity of colour as resuscitating us to the uterine state: "that it pours itself out, extends itself, escapes, imposes itself upon me as a reminder of what is most archaic in me, *fluid*" (130). The selection of industrial materials is further refined by choosing those with an element of flexibility, which is crucial. Referencing feminine associations of softness and fluidity,⁴ the flexibility of the materials is also a metaphor for change and open-ness. Conversely, these materials explore the feminine as a negative "excess" through their abstracted "synthetic-ness", touching on other feminist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti who speak of a monstrous feminine, outside of the male discourse and problematic (1994). As a direct referent to our global economic systems the choice of industrial materials enters a dialogue with the excess of mass production and pressing environmental concerns.

To search for an alternate feminist practice requires more than representing the feminine, more than just exploring femininity, but creating a paradigm of sexual difference that provides for two sexes, two others, in a non-hierarchical relationship. Throughout her entire oeuvre Irigaray speaks of the two as not only male and female, but also mother and daughter, woman to woman or one to "the other".⁵ Her project across decades of work is fundamentally not about one sex, but about sexual difference: "What I want is not to create a theory of woman, but to secure a place for the feminine in sexual difference... it is rather a matter of trying to practice that difference" (1985, 159).

And it is the space between two sexes that can provide a rich potential for transformation, open-ness and an ethical relationship between them. This midway point can be theorised as the interval and is explored metaphorically and conceptually in *enmeshed*. The wall itself can be read as an interval, a threshold between two spaces, between the self and the other. It is also a skin, heightened by the fleshy tones, that references the containment of the physical organ, the border between our internal and external selves. The practices of repeating, stretching, hooking and hanging enacted on the materials explore material and conceptual metaphors for restriction, boundaries, containment and the Threshold/Interval between the self and the other. The pattern on the wall creates a kind of domestic fence or barrier that acts as a porous threshold potentially enabling transfer and communication between two territories. Gaps and spaces in between allow for open-ness and change, while the octopus straps hold down potentially wayward walls,

⁴ Irigaray examines fluidity in *The mechanics of fluids*, chapter 6 of *This sex which is not one*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y. 1985.

⁵ For example in *When our Lips Speak Together*, chapter 11 of *This sex which is not one* or *Approaching the other as other*, chapter 3 of *Key Writings* (Continuum, London, N.Y. 2004) or *Elemental Passions* (Routledge, N.Y. 1992).

a temporary containment, yet poised for quick release.

Across a number of texts Irigaray uses a range of terms to articulate the interval such as excess, breath, air, threshold, the invisible, lips and mucous.⁶ The Interval is extremely important to Irigaray's conception of sexual difference, as it is not only the space in-between the two, it is also the very site of the conditions for existence of the two. Furthermore, it is not only a space between two sexes, it is also the space between two "others", where each one can approach and meet the other in a relationship of open-ness. As Rebecca Hill identifies:

Irigaray's interval can be read both as an opening to a non-hierarchical relation between woman and man and as the differentiating force of sexed becoming, in excess of a theory of subjectivity (2012, 3).

The interval of sexual difference is a space of potential and becoming. This space/place is fleeting and ephemeral, yet open and expansive, ripe for the emergence of possibilities. This allows for lived experience and a multiplicity of experience and identities to be present and in relation. Sexual difference as a process of divergence, whereby difference is not a binary opposition, but rather a non-hierarchical paradigm of inter-subjectivity and mutual relations is perhaps a paradigm for a way forward in feminist art, and this project draws on the phenomenological as the means to do this.

Through an embodied installation strategy of a womb-like enclosed space and a pink fleshiness throughout, the fluid, swelling, sagging and bulging octopus straps enact a rhythmic pattern at once both decorative and potentially stifling, yet filled with gaps and holes that offer space and air to breath. The actions and agency of the straps — separate components hooked into each other, yet each one its own identity — provide a variance in form through the variance in tension, pinioned to the wall via metal hooks, akin to Merleau-Ponty's durable field of repeatable patterns, remaining open to alterations (Guenther 2011, 26).

Irigaray's emphasis on the maternal-feminine and the philosophy of sexual difference has been taken up through *enmeshed* to offer an expanded field of relations where a multiplicity of identities might exist in a feminist ethical space. Drawing on materiality and a phenomenological approach through visual and material references to the body, flesh, psychological affect and embodiment, this project seeks to create an alternative feminist paradigm in art making.

But others are open for you. And this bodily dwelling in which you can move or rest is not enclosed. It unfolds around you as you move, without need to search for windows or doors. You are not stopped by an opaque wall. The world belongs to us – does not belong to us. We live in it in all its width and breadth and in all its dimensions (Irigaray 1992, 68).

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Biography

CAROLINE PHILLIPS is a Melbourne based artist working in sculpture. She is currently in her second year of a PhD at Victorian College of the Arts, School of Art, University of Melbourne. Her research interests include feminist art, sexual difference theory, minimalism and New Materialism. Caroline also has an independent writing and curatorial practice, including the ongoing feminist art project 'The F Word'.

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