

Carnal Adherence and Transformative Exchange: Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray, and the Intersubjective Experience of Architecture

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In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, modern and post-modern philosophies have abandoned the classical division of the world into mind and matter, body and spirit, self and other. What are the possibilities for the post-Cartesian subject to relate to the material world, and, particularly, to architecture? Luce Irigaray's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's explorations of transformative exchange in the face of an irreducible Other provide direction for the intersubjective experience of architecture.

Irigaray seeks to redefine the human subject by addressing the feminine construction of alterity. She advocates a form of "transformational exchange" between subjects, wherein, as Tamsin Lorraine describes it, each person "would allow the other to shape her or his experience through open receptiveness and response to the other" and allow a transformation of her or his own subjective boundaries. This transformative exchange stemming from intersubjective experience replaces the distinct and separate Cartesian subject, the self-contained *cogito*, with a subject continually redefined through interaction. How one negotiates the exchange between self and other, how one manages to nurture both oneself and one's interlocutor, is a central question for Irigaray. In *Sexes and Genealogies*, she advocates creation of "copulative spaces" between couples, wherein each participant both receives and offers "rejuvenating transformation with a loving other" in a process of mutual perception.¹

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray extends this mutually generative process to encompass human interaction with the cultural world. Lorraine describes the process, in which "two transmuting subjects mutually engender each other in living contact with a [cultural]

world in which they are immersed." This process requires "open receptivity to a world that is always impinging on and permeating" the human subject.² Lorraine is describing contact with the human other here, but the description has very much in common with Merleau-Ponty's description of the beckoning and solicitous material world.

Like Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty posits a human subject transformed by acknowledging and experiencing alterity, but Merleau-Ponty goes beyond Irigaray³ in positing that human beings are not the sole subjects in the exchange. He envisions the human subject entangled in the midst of other subjects within the encompassing medium he calls the Flesh. The Flesh, which encompasses all of existence, is an alchemical domain where interaction among subjects both transforms the subjects and generates creative issue. Merleau-Ponty's active rather than substantive formulation of the subject, like Irigaray's, privileges connecting over being and privileges relationship over any definition of self or other, for the interweaving among parts of the Flesh is more fundamental than any of its components. In his philosophy, the self is an open circuit formed anew every moment through interaction with complementary entities, and meaning has the same contingency. In the construction of the Flesh, differentiation between subject and object, sensible and intelligible are peripheral concerns; such questions are replaced by a questioning into the nature and depth of our interrelationships.

The Flesh, then, is the overarching milieu within which we constantly intertwine with other subjects through sensuous interaction. The open receptivity and response Irigaray imagines in interactions with other human beings expands under Merleau-Ponty to include the

sensuous world. In sensing, as in Irigaray's transformative exchange, our boundaries become porous; at times it is even impossible to sort out exactly where they are as odors inhabit our noses and lungs, sounds vibrate through the surface of our eardrums, and sights play upside down on our retinal walls.

What might such open receptivity to the sensuousness—the spatial and material qualities—of architecture yield, in the form of an intersubjective relationship? Would we as subjects transform through sensuous interaction? Might we take in the vastness of an urban plaza or entwine ourselves within the intimacy of a cellular sleeping space? Shield ourselves against the glare from a reflective wall or skin our knuckles against a rough stone archway? Feel the musty scent of damp masonry invading our lungs, or struggle to catch the delicate scent of oiled wood? In such exchanges, where does the architecture end and we begin?

Both Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty ground intersubjective experience beneath the level of language. In an examination of mysticism, Irigaray identifies the subconscious as a place or agent of borderless communion. The mystic achieves unity with the world and operates at a prediscursive level of experience, creating self anew in a give-and-take process of becoming. In the "sensible transcendental," Irigaray uses transcendent religious imagery to construct an image of a material, non-transcendent, feminine divine. The sensible transcendental crosses divisions between "masculine/feminine, self/other, and mind/body"⁴ in an active and ceaseless process of becoming that transforms subjective boundaries⁵ in much the same manner as Merleau-Ponty's *Flesh*.

Merleau-Ponty locates the prediscursive level of experience in the moment of raw sensation, as we ecstatically attune to a sensuous element of the *Flesh*. He writes also of the imperceptible lag between our experience of a place and our conceptualization of it.⁶ The subconsciously attuned mind of the mystic and the sensible transcendental, like the *Flesh* itself, are realms where the boundaries of self are ambiguous and where the attitude is participatory, a realm of processes rather than products. Within these interactive realms, the solid boundaries of a *cogito* dissolve to allow the world to enter and mix with the human participant, transforming that participant in the process.

To Merleau-Ponty, phenomena must be experienced—"taken up..., melded with the body and lived"—rather than imagined or "merely thought about," and our experiences take place for the most part precognitively, with us unselfconsciously immersed in a world to

which we are "sensibly attuned." Carol Bigwood refers to this immersion as a "silent, noncognitive, intimate bonding of our body" with the world, as when we become perceptually lost within the vast blueness of the sky. In her poetic description,

[I] enter into a sensuous rhythm of existence that is already there and that is peculiar to the sky in its blue depths.... My living situation becomes one of blue. I can feel the blue's profundity and become immersed in it because of a bodily *openness* that lets the sky pulse through me and, in the same trembling stroke, lets my bodily sensing breathe life into the blue sky. [Now] the sky and myself are only abstract moments of a single incarnate communication, [a] bodily-skyly sensibility that tremulously runs through me and that is neither passively received nor actively willed....⁷

In such experiences, we open to perceived subjects to the point of losing our perceptual exteriority. Within this state of immersion, we perceive—a constantly fluxing and reciprocal experience wherein boundaries are crossed and subjects transformed. Helen Fielding describes our body's ability to re-form in relationship with changing situations as it moves into its surroundings and changes in response to them. Our pupils may dilate in response to a change in lighting level; we may become anxious in response to feeling vulnerable in a deserted parking lot; our skin may flush in response to heat or to a verbal attack. Even when subsuming sensuous experience in cognitive intent (taking a walk because we know it has health benefits), the phenomenological body unexpectedly takes charge, causing us to "expand ... into the blue of the sky" and "feel the swaying of the trees resonate with the swaying of [our] own body."⁸

We can well imagine—and remember—transformative experiences of architecture, where our wonderment is engaged by a hidden source of light within a meditative space, or where we feel insignificant and displaced within a long and featureless corridor. With our boundaries made porous through sensing and perceiving, through receptivity and response to provocative spaces, we can feel ourselves expand or contract, be drawn forward or repelled, become increasingly uneasy or increasingly entranced with each footfall. In these experiences we transform as subjects in response to the sensuous subject of architecture.

Both Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty explore transformative intersubjective experience, but the key difference between the two philosophers is that Irigaray places all this transformative interaction within the human and

cultural realm and in service to human needs, a stance that colonizes the material world. For example, she advocates an “embodied awareness” of the relationship between our own bodies and “cosmic rhythms,” achieved by spiritual practices such as controlled moving and breathing. Through these practices, Lorraine contends, we can “cultivate the sensible to the point where it becomes spiritual energy rather than renounce it or sacrifice it to the universal.”⁹ In becoming aware of the rhythms of our own bodies and of the larger earth, however, we must be careful not to subsume the experience in symbolism. It is not as if converting the sensible into spiritual energy is the only alternative to rejecting or abstracting it. We may choose instead to experience the sensible through outward-directed carnal attention to the rhythms of other species, both animate and inanimate. Such attentiveness can place our own “embodied awareness” within a larger context and lead us to a true engagement with the sensible—on its own, sensuous terms.

Since philosophy first emerged, it has engaged architecture primarily on a symbolic level. Even Irigaray, whose philosophy rigorously explores intersubjective relationships, engages the material realm primarily as metaphor. When human beings alone possess subjectivity, we inevitably come to objectify, conceptualize, and instrumentalize the non-human realm. Merleau-Ponty offers us instead the possibility of relating intersubjectively and transformatively to a more-than-human world.¹⁰ If we are ever to relate to architecture intersubjectively on its own terms, they will be the terms of sensuous exchange. Although a non-symbolic relationship with architecture is neither possible nor desirable, we can draw out the conceptual lag, stop the rush to symbolism momentarily, existing while time stops in a transformative, intersubjective relationship with architecture.

By locating subjectivity in carnality rather than in consciousness, Merleau-Ponty makes it possible for us to consider different animal and plant species—and even inanimate things—as subjects equal to ourselves (thus providing a framework for the developing field of environmental ethics). By stressing that we are sensible as well as sensate, he reveals the kinship between human beings and other material members of the Flesh. And by characterizing intersubjective experience as a physical, sensuous act of “carnal adherence” with mutually responsive subjects, rather than positing a subject who relates to the world by appropriating it symbolically or conceptually and assigning it meaning, he offers a human subject continually transformed through sensory perception.

Since the most fundamental—and least theorizable—aspect of architecture is its materiality, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of carnal adherence provides the best starting point for developing a true intersubjective relationship with architecture. His idea of “wild being”—that each material subject simultaneously reveals and conceals countless interconnections with other members of the Flesh—can lead us to experience the wild being of architecture,¹¹ wherein a colonnade can reveal the path of the sun over a day or a season through its changing shadow patterns, and a stone wall can record the cumulative effects of dampness and temperature changes through its weathering. Yet we can never exhaustively know the colonnade or the wall; as full-fledged subjects within the Flesh, they also possess the prerogative of concealing. The realization that we can never fully know a material subject—that it always exceeds our grasp—frees us to interact responsively with the other subject without the aim of appropriation or control. Indeed, we can begin to appreciate the actively subjective qualities of the material thing. Merleau-Ponty writes of mountains beckoning to an artist or light reflecting from a pool to dance upon the surface of a stand of trees.¹² Similarly, a sheltered, sunken courtyard may beckon to a human participant through its combination of enclosure, openness, and shadow. Or we may witness light reflecting from a polished floor to play upon the uneven textures of an adjacent wall.

The fact that architecture is so often distributed by means of visual images makes it important to consider the sense of vision at some length. Irigaray considers vision to be a speculative tool and prefers touch as a transformative medium of exchange. She characterizes vision as the origin of “dichotomous oppositions” that interrupt the tissue of the tangible and attributes many of our societal imbalances, such as the despoilment of the earth, to the privileging of vision.¹³ Merleau-Ponty, however, considers vision and touch to be interrelated, describing vision as “a palpation with the look,” and contends that both senses inscribe us within the larger world. We can see because we are visible, can touch because we are tactile, because we are made of the same stuff of the world. In the same way that we become lost in perceiving the vast, blue sky, Merleau-Ponty writes, “He who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*.”¹⁴

Merleau-Ponty subverts the appropriative nature of vision by encompassing both vision and the visible within the Flesh. In his philosophy, vision is not a means of mastery, but a union based in the same carnality as touch; thus, both touch and vision escape the dichotomies of which Irigaray writes. We can engage in

Merleau-Ponty's intersubjective, carnal vision while inhabiting a place. But, in viewing it as a set of images, as we so often do, we have little alternative to the objectifying gaze of which Irigaray writes. Architecture is so often designed to present itself compositionally to the gaze, aided and encouraged by our image-rich technology. Exotic shapes and eye-catching symbolic elements encourage us to visually consume and conceptualize architecture before ever carnally experiencing it. They are meant to be taken up as images—short-circuiting carnal experience and producing instant meaning—rather than taken in spatially and materially over time. As an alternative strategy, we can draw out the imperceptible lag before conceptualization of which Merleau-Ponty writes by designing architecture that stresses its own material and spatial qualities in ways that escape the scope of words. Elaine Scarry writes that language reaches its limits when confronted with the profoundly abstract or the profoundly concrete.¹⁵ Architecture's wild being stems from its profound concreteness, its conceptually inaccessible materiality and spatiality. Light and surface qualities are often resistant to language in a way that shape and symbolism are not. Repetition and abstraction allow the architectural surface to become background to a foreground of light and shadow play, and texture advances the depth or spatiality of the play.

To Merleau-Ponty, vision is carnal interaction when it is encompassed by movement. His description of the body as an "intertwining of vision and movement"¹⁶ gets at the very heart of architectural experience as architecture's spatiality, tactility, and visibility correspond to our own, and as they complement the motility, touch, and vision of which our bodies are capable. The objectifying gaze can be swallowed up by the whole-body experiences of moving, smelling, hearing, and feeling—and vision itself is transformed by the changing perspectives experienced through motion.

All our material relationships are grounded in spatial depth, and the way our perception of forms, surfaces, and colors changes with changing distance is a testament to depth's experiential primacy. Some architecture occupies itself with this very phenomenon, and all architecture by its nature allows it free play. As we approach a piece of architecture, we perceive the more intricate parts of a surface that, moments before, seemed monolithic. In such an experience we appreciate the liveliness and complexity of the material subject before us and, by extension, the dynamic medium of the Flesh.

In addition to the material subject being active, the space, air, and light between the perceiver and the

perceived are also active and charged, thick with relationship. Surfaces open up and forms realign as we move perceptively through space. In this relational structuring of space, form and outline—indeed, all static aspects of the architecture—become secondary as we perceive things moving and modulating against other things in a primary, enveloping spatial relationship that encloses and relates the perceived and the perceiver.

Elizabeth Grosz, in interpreting Irigaray, writes that traditional western philosophy has constructed a masculine subject on the unacknowledged base of the material and maternal feminine. But Irigaray is similarly exclusive, constructing a feminine human subject on the unacknowledged base of the sensuous, material world. Although her philosophy is filled with material metaphors, they remain metaphors, or at best jumping-off points for constructed meaning. Merleau-Ponty is content to linger in the fullness of the physical and material moment before rushing to meaning; his universe does not "represent" or "recreate," but primarily conjoins. When pressed to posit meaning within perception, he posits that the meaning *is* interrelationship. Put another way, the most fundamental meaning of any encounter is that we have encountered.

Ethics to Irigaray centers around negotiation between two human subjects,¹⁷ a negotiation in which mutual nourishing takes place despite a fundamental separation. Grosz articulates Irigaray's fundamental questions about an ethics based on alterity: "If each sex is recognized as autonomous, what reorganizations of space, time, ontology, transcendence, ethics, are needed to accommodate them? What kinds of encounter are possible?" These encounters must always include an acknowledgement of irreducible alterity, "an acceptance of the externality and indeed priority of the other for the subject." In order to accommodate this irreducible alterity, Irigaray appropriates Descartes's idea of "wonder."¹⁸ When two subjects approach each other in wonder, each experiences the delight an other can give when approached with no sense of opposition or instrumentality. Approaching with a sense of wonder renders one unable to possess, consume, or objectify the other. Rather, each subject appreciates the insurmountable difference presented by the other. As Grosz puts it, "Only then can each give to and take what the other has to offer."¹⁹ Irigaray, via Grosz, contrasts this delight to the "hostility and contempt for women's alterity in a patriarchal culture."²⁰

But Irigaray's work reflects the same contempt for the alterity of the material world, which, to Merleau-Ponty, is the irreducible other. Rather than approaching the

material world with wonder, Irigaray relegates it to the same status patriarchal philosophy accords to women. She believes that woman has been accorded the role of space, of container and reference point for men, a “corporeal horizon”²¹ — yet her work assigns this same role to the material subject.

Stephen Ross, in *Plenishment in the Earth*, calls for us to accord the same respect to other species, even inanimate species, as we accord to either gender, and points out the unacknowledged non-human base on which human society is constructed:

If ‘the [male or heterosexual] society we know, our own culture is based on the exchange of women,’ then without a doubt, far more pervasively, the (human) society we know is based upon the exchange and circulation of animals. Heterosexual society would collapse, would cease to reproduce itself, to have a future, if women no longer participated in reproductive exchange. But human society would collapse on the spot, dissipate into dust, if all products made from nonhuman animals were abolished. Every space of human social life is filled with animal products. Every cranny of human life is occupied by animals, microorganisms and insects....²²

Merleau-Ponty’s radical restructuring of subjectivity gives us an ethical base for inclusion of the larger material world in our decisions. Appropriating one of Irigaray’s questions, we may ask about animals, trees, insects, mountains, even architecture — about all the things with which we coexist and with which we daily enter into transformational exchange, “What reorganizations of space, time, ontology, transcendence, ethics, are needed to accommodate them? What kinds of encounter are possible?” The intersubjective experience of architecture is one such possible encounter.

We can open ourselves to the wild being of architecture, existing in wonder in the face of its irreducible alterity — its wild being, understanding that we cannot breach its autonomy to reduce its material fullness to a mental or intellectual construct. As architects, instead of developing buildings and public spaces graphically as geometric constructs, we can design them from the perspective of engaged sensory interaction — taking into account what it might be like to move through a space while simultaneously seeing, smelling, hearing, and feeling it. Instead of heaping symbolic elements onto architecture — be they temple fronts or fragmented geometric shards, we can undertake to draw out the lag before conceptualization by incorporating elements that escape naming. We can offer buildings whose

aggressive materiality and complex, lived spaces invite our responsive sensory interaction.

As participants, we can inhabit spaces thoughtfully and search for ways to surpass easy appropriation of images. We can look beyond the symbolic veneer of even the most referential building and appreciate its underlying sensuousness. We can respond to the beckoning of a built place to remember that we are material and spatial beings and thus both immersed within and deeply kin to the sensuous world.

Ross urges us to envision “a way of belonging to nature, [of] resting in the earth,” a way of awe that causes us to care for and cherish things we can never truly “understand or experience.”²³ Nature is the ultimate irreducible Other, and, in being in awe of all life forms, Ross contends, we can recognize that “unlimited knowledges and truths rest, in the earth.”²⁴ The world is engaged in a perpetual becoming, and our challenge is to approach it in “open receptiveness and response to the other,”²⁵ recalling the interweaving of Merleau-Ponty’s *Flesh* and the endless self-creation of Irigaray’s copulative space.

The aims of Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray — inclusion, therapeutic interaction with the Other, and transformational exchange — are not so far apart. Irigaray’s feminine subject develops through transformational exchange with a differently sexed Other. Merleau-Ponty’s human subject transforms through interaction with other participants within the enveloping *Flesh*. Irigaray’s insistence on defining the subject as a cognitive ego limits her philosophy’s engagement with the material world. But if we confront her work with its unacknowledged base and extend her ideas of intersubjective experience to include the larger, more-than-human world, then her work, like Merleau-Ponty’s, has great potential to inform the experience of architecture.

In the end, each philosopher can take something from the other, and both can lead us towards a reciprocal, intersubjective experience of architecture. Following Irigaray’s and Merleau-Ponty’s ideas, we can experience architecture through open receptivity to an irreducible other, a transformative process that allows true engagement with the sensuous world.

NOTES

¹ Tamsin Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze: Experiments in Visceral Philosophy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, 89, including a quotation of Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 144.

- ² Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze*, 75, 77-8.
- ³ Even though Merleau-Ponty wrote decades before Irigaray, the thoughts contained in his work and the directions it implies and encourages expand her work in important ways.
- ⁴ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, London: Routledge, 1991, 140-7, in Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze*, 69-70.
- ⁵ Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze*, 69-70, including a reference to Whitford, *Philosophy in the Feminine*, 144.
- ⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1962, chapters "Sense Experience" and "Space," esp. 233-5, 274-5.
- ⁷ Carol Bigwood, "Renaturalizing the Body (with the Help of Merleau-Ponty)." *Hypatia* vol. 6 no. 3 (Fall 1991): 57, 61-2, drawing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962, 211-16. In this piece, Bigwood describes the limitations of the culturally constructed postmodern subject and proposes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological subject as a more solid starting point for the feminist subject, one that would allow "an incarnate genderized body" (61).
- ⁸ Helen Fielding, "Depth of Embodiment: Spatial and Temporal Bodies in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty." *Philosophy Today* vol. 43:1 (spring 1999): 80.
- ⁹ Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze*, 87-88.
- ¹⁰ David Abram develops this term in *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, New York, 1996.
- ¹¹ I mention "wild being" only briefly, because I have developed this idea elsewhere: in "Receptivity to the Sensuous: Architecture as 'Wild Being,'" in *Architecture and Civilization*, ed. Michael H. Mitias, Rodopi Press, 1999, and again, concentrating more on Merleau-Ponty's underlying philosophy, in "'Wild Being' in Architecture," 2000 SW ACSA Conference Proceedings.
- ¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, Evanston, Ill., 1993, 128, 142.
- ¹³ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, 162, 164.
- ¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Eanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1968, 134-5.
- ¹⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, "Introduction," esp. 3-4.
- ¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 124.
- ¹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminist*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989, 141.
- ¹⁸ René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, article 53, in Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 13.
- ¹⁹ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 177.
- ²⁰ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 177.
- ²¹ Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 174. As such, woman, "is space, place or 'home' and consequently has none herself."
- ²² Stephen David Ross, *Plenishment in the Earth: An Ethic of Inclusion*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 129.
- ²³ Ross, *Plenishment in the Earth*, 154.
- ²⁴ Ross, *Plenishment in the Earth*, 155.
- ²⁵ Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze*, 89.