

How to take place (but only for so long)

take 1

In June 1999, I gave a paper at a conference called 'Alterities: Interdisciplinarity and "Feminine" Practices of Space' in Paris organised by a Romanian architect called Doina Petrescu. The delegates included women from France, the UK and the US, both older and younger generation feminists, as well as theorists and practitioners. Interestingly it was the US and UK feminists who referenced the French feminism of the 1970's in their work, while the French contingent, particularly the older architects, seemed to oppose these writings. They felt, that as women, they had been excluded from the architectural main stream in France and that theory had not helped. While I agreed with their position in some ways, I was not prepared to abandon theory, at least, not yet.

During the short time I had worked for the feminist architectural co-operative Matrix in the early 1990's, we talked a lot about feminism, but there were never any conversations about aesthetics, and certainly no theory. It seemed to be beside the point, Theory was not something which required discussion. A decade later, muf, the all female art-architectural practice who seem to have succeeded Matrix, now stand for all the 'f' words in architecture. Yet muf do not describe themselves as feminists, individually some members might, but collectively they do not. Even their name signifies a fundamental shift in feminist politics, from an earnest modernist heart-on-sleeve approach to a post-modern sexy playfulness. But muf do work through feminism, through French feminist theory, if not explicitly, through their concern with an aesthetics of process. muf consider the way that they work, the very processes they adopt, to constitute the 'form' of the work, to provide the aesthetic content.¹

At the Paris conference, members of muf and Matrix were placed on the speakers' platform at the same time. For me this was a vital moment: where I could see that a new approach to

¹ See for example Matrix, *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment*, London: Pluto Press, 1984 and *This is what we do: a muf manual*, London, Ellipsis, 2001.

feminist architecture was required, that Doina had recognised this, in instigating a debate concerning feminist ethics and aesthetics, what she has called 'poetics and politics'. The majority of women in 'taking place' (see take 3) were participants of that conference – a significant event that like *Sexuality and Space* and *Desiring Practices*, I believe has marked out a new stage in feminist architectural practice and theory, one which describes itself in terms of 'feminine'.²

But something else changed for me, during that conference, on a much more personal level

epilogue: spinning

site: middle of the courtyard

action: to spin and speak (without falling over)

words:

Irigaray notes that when her mother goes away, the little girl does not do the same things as the little boy. She does not play with a string and a reel that symbolise her mother. Because she and her mother are of the same sex, her mother cannot have the object status of a reel. Instead the little girl is distressed. She plays with dolls - a different kind of object from the reel. She dances, 'this dance is also a way for the girl to create a territory of her own in relation to her mother'. In her dance she spins around de-stabilising existing connections between herself and her place, making new ones between herself and her (m)other. She creates 'a vital subjective space open to the cosmic maternal world, to the gods, to the present other'.³

Irigaray's notion of the daughter spinning to make room between her and her mother, resonates strongly for me. I imagine being five again spinning round and around in the middle of a room. Only stopping when the furniture, walls and floor begin to revolve around me, when everything around me slips out of place. . .

² Beatriz Colomina (ed.), *Sexuality and Space*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992 and Duncan McCorquodale, Katerina Rüedi and Sarah Wigglesworth (eds.), *Desiring Practices: Architecture, Gender and the Interdisciplinary*, London: Black Dog Publishing 1996.

³ Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: towards a culture of difference*, London: Routledge, 1993, p.59.

I have found those words of Irigaray so inspirational, for so long, that is hard now to consider them critically. I have come to take for granted that, for me, the state of 'de-stabilization', my slipping of 'out of place', is a positive place to be. Why? Because I have connected letting go with liberation and assumed that my spinning is transformational, that by turning and being turning I can create future possibility, make no place into a new place to be. But for how long? The giddiness and the freedom of letting go that spinning offers can only last for so long. I, for one, cannot maintain myself in this place that turns me as I turn, that makes me feel so disorientated. As I suggested at the beginning, of this piece, the Paris conference got me thinking, differently, about myself and my work, about my almost uncritical belief in the utopian horizon of French feminist theory. But I know now there are difficulties with giving and with being out of place. Instead I realise that I need to take, to take place, for myself, if only for so long.

Taking place.

How to take place?

Who to take place from?

How to give place back?

How to take place? (but only for so long)?

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