

## **The Scent of a Woman: between flesh and breath**

*In general, women are much more interested in others. This can be seen, for example, in the use of transitive verbs with the person as the animate object - 'je le lave' [I wash him], m'aimes-tu?' [do you love me?] - or of prepositions expressing intersubjectivity; avec [with], entre [between, amongst], a [to], pour [for], etc.[. . .] Women are more attentive to the question of place: they are close to things, to others (autres, which is related to one of the indo-european roots of the verb etre [to be]).<sup>1</sup>*

### **at**

Sharon Kivland's 'La Bonheur des Femmes' consists of twenty four photographs hung low on the gallery wall. Above them float the names of various famous perfumes: 'Allure', 'Fantasme', 'Knowing', 'Fragile', 'Dazzling', 'Sublime'. The images all show women's feet and legs clad in black from the knees down. This is apparent. But another similarity is not. All the photographs were taken in the same kind of place - at the perfume counters of various shopping venues in Paris: La Samaritaine, Galeries Lafayette, Au Printemps, Bazaar de L'Hotel de Ville. Further all these female legs are at rest. Pausing. These feet are in touch with the ground. Just.

The making of these images continues the development of themes Kivland has been exploring in her work for a number of years - exchange, consumption and display and the gendering of these relationships. My own research into spaces of consumption in early nineteenth century London brought me into contact with similar spaces and figures: with arcades, shops and shoppers; with Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray, as well as with a rich and complex set of thematics concerning the commercial activity of shopping, the conflation of the female shopper with the commodities she is purchasing, the exchange and use value of femininity, and choreographies of looking and moving in public urban spaces.

Luce Irigaray's seminal essay 'Women on the Market' is a key reference point here. Irigaray reworks the marxist analysis of commodities as the elementary form of capitalist wealth to show the ways in which women are commodities in patriarchal exchange - the objects of physical and metaphorical exchange among men. The female commodity has two irreconcilable categories - use value and exchange value. But as well as provide a feminist critique of women's existing position in patriarchy, Irigaray's writing also offers women an utopian position. Her account of exchange suggests to me a dynamic gendering of space, a choreography of mobility and visibility. For Irigaray, female subjectivity is a spatial condition, where the spatiality of the female body metaphorically describes new forms of cultural exchange between men and women as equal but different subjects. The 'between' is important here as a way of imagining these new occupations of space between men and women. The 'between' is offered to us for contemplation in Kivland's images - in both economies of vision and movement.

### **'looking' and 'being-looked-at'**

Acts of looking - voyeurism, narcissism, gazing and fetishisation - and being looked at - exhibitionism, spectacle, masquerade and display - are circuits of complex visual exchanges. Traditional models of psychoanalysis which describe the construction of the gaze in relation to various stages of childhood development, provide a simplistic model: the active male gazer and the passive female spectacle. In visual

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<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference*, London: The Athlone Press, 1994, pp. 48-9.

art practice, the objectifying function of the male gaze can be reinforced by positioning women as the focus of the look within the space of the image. Even at a time when we are keen to reject notions of intentionality, the ways in which we interpret what we see, depends often on what is known of the gender politics of the artist. In Kivland's images we see a repetition of the-body-in-parts - a series of disembodied legs. Does she want us to believe that she is colluding, fetishising the female body by displaying it in bits? Or that she is resisting, refusing the fetishising gaze? These legs are not that sexy after all. Do I ask the same questions of Clifton Steinberg's photographs? An artist who also makes images of women caught in the act, caught looking at themselves in compact mirrors in arcades?

This raises a series of thoughts about the relationship between women. Between at least three women: a critic, a photographer and her subject matter. Between the gaze of one woman contemplating the gaze of another woman and a-woman-gazed-at. My gazing suggests alternative positions. That there might be different kinds of look; 'gazing' implies authority and surveillance, while 'seeing' allows multiple and different viewpoints. That the distinction made between 'looking' and 'being-looked-at' is a false one; it is almost always possible for reciprocity to occur - even the image looks back. That a woman may 'look' differently from a man - or from any other women for that matter. That a woman may not objectify nor fetishise, and even if she were to, she might well do that differently. And finally, that what is not in the image is as important as what it contains.

Between what is in the image and what is not, a gap is created. A gap between the surface and what lies beyond. For some, woman *is* surface, femininity is masquerade. But Irigaray's theory of mimicry suggests a conscious strategy for destabilising masquerade. Mimicry is a subversive act which seeks to expose the limitations of the binary oppositions of phallogocentric discourse through imitation. A gap appears between the female subject and the feminine sexed identity she is imitating. Are Kivland's photographs like those of Cindy Sherman about this gap? The images have matt surfaces. There is no reflection. No return of the gaze. The woman looks available, but is somehow closed off. The viewer is not allowed to participate fully. Yes, there is a gap, created by the photographer between viewer and subject-to-be-viewed. This gap suggests the act of looking is itself the subject of these photographs.

### **where they are 'at'**

So far, Kivland's images of women's feet have provided a chance to contemplate the gendering of looking. But they also offer something else. These feet are caught up in another rhetoric. One which is more to do with where they are 'at'.

At the moment these feet are at rest. They have arrived. But, it is inevitable that soon they will leave. Here, they are in-between one place and another. This is not the first time moving women have been present in Kivland's work. They are caught in motion in 'Les Passages Couverts' (1998) and in 'Mes Peripateticiennes' (1999).

Elsewhere I have argued that mobility is a gendered issue. In the early nineteenth century, women who moved freely on the streets, streetwalkers, were associated with loose morality. Women's movement on the street was controlled through legislation, such the Vagrancy Acts, and through gendered representations of the city, where in the narrative of the fallen women for example, the cause of her eventual destruction was her walking in the city.

If we can return to Irigaray briefly. In 'On the Market', Irigaray highlights some patriarchal rules concerning sexual difference and space. Men are active, they move and exchange. Women are passive, they are to-be-exchanged/to-be-moved as commodities between men. Hence, those women who determine their own movement, who perform acts of exchange, who buy and sell, are rule-breakers, are threatening. On other occasions, Irigaray has argued that women's connection with nomadism caused their confinement within the 'prison-house' of the male symbolic order. She suggests a different way of conceptualising women's relation to movement, through the figure of the angel, an alternative to the phallus. The angel is not one but many. She circulates. She mediates between things. The angel is a threshold figure. She goes between.

I would like to end here by considering Kivland's images in terms of the angelic - of what it is to be between.

To be at the perfume counter is to be between. To be in a liminal state, a magical space of enchantment where the air is dense with imaginings of who you might become. The anticipated application of a certain scent, the possibilities inherent in its purchase, is a dance between being somewhere and imagining many elsewhere. At the perfume counter, this dance is played out again and again at the very point the scents are allowed to breath, to escape into the air. The juxtaposition of the names of perfumes - all words which suggest desire - hovering just above the images of the grounded feet produces a place between, a gap between two signifiers, between earth and air, flesh and breath, between who we are and who might become.

*the angel is that which unceasingly passes through the envelope(s) or container(s), goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline, changing every decision, thwarting all repetition<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London: The Athlone Press, 1993, p. 15).