

Future Directions in Feminist Phenomenology
The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario
May 23-25, 2013
David Chu International Centre, WSS 2130

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Friday May 24, 2:20 p.m.

Crafting Contingency

ABSTRACT

Our culture is filled with entrenched and ponderous systems—of politics, philosophy, religion, education, commerce, war, science, art, and family—each one its own institution. The landscape is likewise filled with implicit expectations about gender, age, sexual orientation, appearance, and vocation—institutions sometimes less visible but no less normative. These established ways of understanding are sedimented deeply into the fabric of our lives, privileging the voices of power.

A starkly drawn understanding of alterity underpins the structure. At one extreme, we banish the material world to the realm of maximal otherness: it is the matter opposed to my mind, the object opposed to my own subjectivity. At the other, we collapse subtle and complex human differences into “neutral and universal” norms, and when human variances become impossible to ignore, we objectify them in caricatures of difference. Modern systems echo these extremes, from corporations that wipe away ecosystems in their rush to exploit resources, to “neutral” laws that implicitly favor the most powerful among us. Even the postmodern notion of infinite variation within a deformable field features a corporately controlled global field whose vastness makes any individual deformation meaningless in scale.

And yet.... At any given moment, we are free to break out of habitual ways of seeing and thinking, free to actively create. In a paradoxical intertwining of sedimentation and fresh expression, our architecture courses teach methods of creativity, and our architectural design systems are systems of creation. Architects have habitual and enculturated ways of seeing, but the creative nature of the discipline shines an expressive ray of light into the depths of architectural habit.

“Crafting Contingency” examines principles of architectural expression to explore the complexities of alterity and strategies for crafting a coherent, co-authored structure that accommodates difference, anomaly, deformations, provocations, and lines of force. It draws from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the flesh, Luce Irigaray’s irreducible alterity, and Donna Haraway’s cyborg manifesto to propose a contingent way of making that accommodates multiple voices.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the flesh is a philosophy of encounter, transformation, and becoming that opens profound possibilities for seeing and thinking anew by redrawing existence as a relational partnership of perceiver and perceived. Emphasizing our common carnality, the flesh draws sensuous things into the relational sphere. Stressing the transformative nature of encountering others, it sensitizes us to human difference. The flesh forms a hinge between the social and material realms, treating them not as two polar extremes, but as spaces of encounter that intertwine commonality and difference.

Already architects are making patterned sense out of postmodern complexities and fragmentations through parametric design that accommodates difference within a flexuous system. Architectural design provides a model for the larger culture to find ways of setting parameters that make intricate sense out of a system with multiple generators, and to transform fear of the unknown into the vibrant tension of crafting something fragile with care.

The flesh's model of shared carnality alongside transformative encounters with difference aligns with architecture, which by its nature incorporates both attention to human needs and attunement to embodiment. Architecture's celebration of complexity and its exploration of deep pattern manifest a creative understanding of developing systems that tolerate deformation. Together they model an embodied ethics that creatively interweaves voices of alterity.