

FROM Alex Martinis Roe presentation: “evolutions of collective desire”

TYPOLOGY INSTRUCTIONS PROPOSAL SCHEDULE LETTER CALL OUT
 PLAN OUTLINE TEXT / ESSAY NOTES OTHER

I'm going to share a few stories with you from a research journey I'm currently on. One of its beginnings took place some years ago, when I met Luce Irigaray, a very well known philosopher of sexual difference, for lunch. She said she wanted to take part in a conversation series I was facilitating at the time, between women of different generations, and so, after meeting her, I wrote her a letter proposing that she have a conversation with Elizabeth Grosz, also a well-known theorist who takes Irigaray's work as her starting point. Elizabeth said yes, but Luce refused. This scenario set a whole lot of things in motion. I started to think about the relationship between theory and practice in feminist history. I think I wanted to remind Luce and her generation, and my own generation that these theories that are so important to us came about through such conversations and relations between women in the activist projects of the women's liberation movements.

I felt the best way to explore the importance of embodied exchange in feminist theory - a kind of social history of ideas - would be to go and spend time with some of these groups and collectives, who had played an important role in creating the ideas that I think could, and already do play an important role in the future of relations between different embodiments. After some time, I started to describe what I was doing as ethnography and my methodology as “participant observation”. Last week, someone told me about Clifford Geertz's term “deep hanging out”, which he uses to describe the anthropological method. I guess that pretty much sums up the more informal research I've been doing with these groups, which has perhaps been more important than the more formal methods I've also used like interviews and archival research, which often shift into “deep hang out” mode when they get interesting anyway. This method was more successful with some groups than others.

In particular, one Paris-based group, *Psychanalyse et Politique*, resisted that format, although experiencing their patterns of resistance was perhaps one of the most interesting moments in this project. I noticed that it is a habit of theirs, of this milieu in Paris, which is a history full of splits. *Psychanalyse et Politique*, or *Psych et Po*, is the organisation that is largely responsible for the ideas that get called “French Feminism” in the Anglophone world. Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous – two of the protagonists of this particular strand of “French feminism” (which carries that name as though there aren't others) were both involved with *Psych et Po*. Neither of them are French by the way – Irigaray is Belgian and Cixous is an Algerian Jew. One afternoon I spoke with the heiress who, since soon after 1968 has funded the political activities of *Psych et Po* and she told me that what is not known so well, is that Irigaray came to write her first feminist book through a relationship with the founder of *Psych et Po*, psychoanalyst and theorist Antoinette Fouque. Soon after 1968, two things happened. Antoinette undertook analysis with Luce, and then Antoinette invited Luce to teach some classes in her seminar at the University that had been set up in Vincenne. The heiress I spoke to claimed that Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, which is internationally known among feminist scholars and considered to be the original reference for this theory, is actually an unacknowledged elaboration of Antoinette's not so well-known preexisting concept of an ontology of two sexes. Even if this is the case, there is no doubt that Irigaray's contribution to this idea has been extraordinary and should be acknowledged as such. But what this story shows, whether or not it is the truth for both Antoinette and Irigaray, is that the relations which brought about these ideas are not yet a clear part of how they have been used and

historicised. My project To Become Two is an attempt to resituate a series of interlinked important ideas, like this one, in the context of their relational becoming, beyond the publishing and authorship machinery, which, overall, has not yet been done differently enough, especially by those feminists whose work is concerned with writing new forms of subjectivity into being.

This practice of splitting, refusing and renouncing between Antoinette and Luce and then and many times over among other members of Psych et Po and then between Psych et Po and other feminists groups (and I would venture, the 1968 activist generation in Paris in general) is one I think we can leave behind. Just as an example of the kind of behaviour that went on: other feminists took Psych et Po's publishing house, des Femmes, to court for registering the Mouvement de libération des femmes as their own private trademark, even though it was an organisation that included many different groups. Rather than looking at these kinds of divisive relations, what is really useful, is looking at how and why the ideas Psychanalyse et Politique generated have migrated to other times and places, and been used as the foundation for various political practices undertaken by other groups.

What Psychanalyse et Politique invented was a way of doing politics together that was entirely different from the leftist groups they had been a part of. In the student uprisings of 1968, many of them had been involved in leftist organisations, only to find that although they were participating in "revolutionary" activity, normative gender roles were still ascribed to them – at meetings they found themselves expected to wash the coffee cups, rather than make decisions. Perhaps the practice of splitting, of taking an unwavering stance with no room for compromise, became a habit formed during this initial separation from the masculine code of leftist politics. Psychanalyse et Politique is a separatist organisation which undertook a range of projects, but in working together, they did not replicate the leftist model of horizontality, which with its rhetoric of equality, did not directly address the real disparities that exist among those

who participate in a common project. Often what happens in oppositional political models is that the alternative confirms the status quo. So rather than resisting disparity, Psychanalyse et Politique allowed it and even affirmed it, without, they claimed, reinstating a normative hierarchical structure – although this is debatable. This came from their renegade group experimentation with psychoanalysis and its parameters. The format of the session and particularly the physical and linguistic disparity between the analyst and the analysand became the experimental set up that would allow them to rework collective politics to focus on difference rather than sameness. Perhaps precisely because psychoanalysis had been used to make political problems appear personal, Psychanalyse et Politique converted this discourse, this tool of subordination and control, and adapted it into a tool for inventing and affirming a female language and subjectivity. It became a personal process of transformation undertaken as a collective political practice.

Psychanalyse et Politique and the MLF organised some large-scale meetings in 1972, which brought women from different parts of France and Europe together. I made a film about one of these meetings, which I will play in a minute. The reason the story about the meeting is important is because it is the moment of direct contact with some Italian women, who at that meeting learned about the way the women in Paris were working with psychoanalysis, and then combined it with their grassroots politics, what they call "starting from oneself" and their commitment to collective organising, and later in Milan developed a robust political model, a practical politics of difference, which has proven itself to be extremely useful and adaptable to different situations.

It is a political model that takes as its primary concern the relations between those who participate in it. This involves a very attentive approach to interperso-

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-nal relationships, where a love, care and respect for the difference, the singularity, of the one you have a relationship with, as well as a true value for your own difference are the primary practices of this politics. This practice of relations, being based on the mutual affirmation of difference, necessarily exults in and also creates the authority that each participant needs to do her political activity, and beyond that, to live her life in a way that she has decided to live it. This is the structure of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective (who I have done “deep hanging out” with), and is an unusual one for a women's group. Usually the relations in a women's group are based on similarity – a structure of commiseration and solidarity based on mutual experience outside the group. But what the Milanese group say, is that this common structure always reconfirms the position that capitalist, patriarchal society has ascribed to women. What is really liberating, they say from their experience, is for women to give each other the authority to invent their own subjectivity entirely. In this sense, ‘woman’ is a totally empty signifier – it means and determines nothing at all. What it does is to mark difference, and that, according to them, is something to affirm, because sexual difference is an embodied difference that is never the same. Each woman who undertakes the practice of relations invents her own embodied difference, her singularity, and that of the other she is relating to.

I'll now show the film I made about one of these meetings, called It was an unusual way of doing politics, there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...

The practice of relations that the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective practice might seem as though it is a privileged practice – a luxury for those who do not have something real to fight against, but this is a complete misunderstanding. It is a practice that is available to anyone, regardless of their status or wealth in the dominant order, because it requires nothing beyond what two women can create in their relation to each other. This may sound small, micro, and you might well ask, how can this be so crucial to solving big

problems, because that is indeed the claim I am making. As an example of what it can do on a macro level, in Barcelona a group of women, with whom I've also spent time, took on the Milanese practice in a very dedicated way in the 90s and disseminated the practice widely among feminists in the city. One of the women who learned about the practice there helped to shape the way that the women's council, within the local government, is organised. She put forward a proposal, which was taken on many years ago now, that rather than having a president, that the women's council should instead be led by a “mentor” – someone who would use her authority to foster the voices of the others. One of those mentors of the women's council has recently become the mayor of the city. Although the role of mayor and the structure of the government have not yet undergone major restructuring, this story is evidence, nevertheless, that this practice can shape and affect macro structures, just as it reworks the micro habits of those who practice it.

I will jump now and point briefly to another key genealogical connection to *Psychanalyse et Politique's* activities. In Sydney in the 70s, Australian theorists who had studied at Paris VIII, the University in Vincenne, in the years immediately following the events of 1968, brought French poststructuralist theory home with them. They made the first (renegade) translations of these theories in English, establishing the first English-speaking diaspora of French theory. What is so interesting about this is that these translations occurred in the midst of a massive social movement, which united student activists, trade unionists and workers, environmental and aboriginal rights activists. As an example of these political alliances, in 1973 in a famous incident called the Philosophy Strike, two PhD candidates proposed to teach a course at Sydney University called “Philosophical aspects of Feminist thought,” but the proposal was rejected. In protest, a large number of staff and students went on strike, which was suppor-

-ted by the Builders' Labourers Federation and other unions. So this group of feminist philosophy students were joined at the protest by building workers waving banners, clearly identifying who they were. In fact, the Builders' Labourers Federation had been infiltrated by Marxist feminists, who set a mandate that any woman who came looking for a job would be given priority. At the same time, the Builders' Labourers supported environmentalists and social housing activists in a movement called the Green Bans, which effectively prevented the construction of a huge system of freeways and highrises that would have demolished all inner-city social housing and green areas. This movement made it clear to that entire generation of activists how power is connected and on a practical level, and how one can use power in one place to affect another. The philosophy strike was successful and a new department called General Philosophy was set up. Emerging out of the strike and this practical experience of how effective it is to work across industries and different social groupings, the General Philosophy community digested French post-structuralism in a transdisciplinary way. For example, the first translations of Irigaray, published in the photocopied, but later printed issues of the Working Papers journal were done by science studies scholars.

This feminist transdisciplinarity, which began in the late 70s in Sydney, and has been simultaneously undertaken in a number of places, and notably Utrecht, where I have also been spending time with the gender studies community. Recently it has reached a new maturity and visibility as the now prominent field of "feminist new materialist" theory, which mixes hard science together with poststructuralist feminist theory to traverse the nature-culture binary and its sedimentation in the divide between the sciences and the humanities. Over the last year, my research led me to begin a project called Our Future Network, which began as a 17 week workshop in my studio with a group of colleagues in Berlin (and which has now moved to other contexts) where we experimented first hand with the practices of the groups Psychanalyse et Politique; the Milan Women's Bookstore

Collective; the milieu in Sydney I just described; and the women's studies community at Utrecht University. The central question of this workshop is how does transdisciplinarity and other aspects of feminist new materialist thought (like that of Vicky Kirby, Rosi Braidotti, and although the term 'new materialist' doesn't suit her, Elizabeth Grosz – who are all connected to this history in Australia) how could their methodologies affect the other political practices we are experimenting with from France and Italy? For example, I think it is crucial that we use the practice of relations as a tool to form alliances with those committed to different political projects, like those on the left, in the green movement and anti-racist struggles. What we have done in our group is to take the new feminist materialist practice of transdisciplinarity and explored its genealogy, retrieving the practice of political alliances from which it came and inventing ways of adapting this genealogy of theory-practice to our own needs, desires and context.

To conclude my talk, I want to shift our attention from the people and places elsewhere that I have been talking about and focus on our situation here and now in this biology classroom. The term 'gender', has by and large eclipsed the term 'sex'. In order to foreground the social construction of gender roles, mostly people now talk about 'gender politics', rather than 'sexual politics'. Looking through transdisciplinary glasses, we might ask a difficult question: if gender is socially constructed, what about our bodies? Behind the social construction parlance of "gender", is often, although not always (!) an assumption that where the body is fixed or predetermined, our social roles are not. What this doesn't account for is that our bodies are in a constant state of becoming, which is an entanglement of genetic and cultural shifts. As Elizabeth Grosz's re-reading of Darwin explores, there is no reason to think that the current morphology of our species into two main types of embodiment is a fixed

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state of affairs. Grosz describes Darwin’s principle of sexual selection as the way that, often, physical characteristics that are dangerous to one sex in a species are nevertheless so attractive to other members of the species, that they continue to be enhanced through the selection of mates that have these characteristics in abundance – for example the brightly coloured feathers of some species of male birds increase their visibility to predators. This principle operates completely independently of natural selection, and is actually, in Grosz’s words “the motor of difference itself” and is what produces the new variations in a species that natural selection selects from. If we think about this laterally, the development of plastic surgery as a way to increase attractiveness is a type of sexually selective behaviour. Likewise, conventions like earrings and lipstick are also sexually selective behaviours that affect the trajectory of our species. It becomes impossible to disentangle the way that certain breast shapes and sizes, or certain types of body hair like beards have been selected for their attractiveness over time from the practices of adornment that have developed over time in different cultures. Do we look at a bower bird and describe the creation of its colourful nest as a “cultural construction” separate from its “natural” morphology? Along with Elizabeth Grosz, I have been rethinking “sex” and “sexual difference”, and I have found that in the genealogy of the thought of sexual difference, from Fouque and Irigaray, to the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, to Utrecht and Sydney there is a speculative wager that it is from an embodied approach to feminist politics, moving beyond the nature-culture, sex-gender binary, that we will create new ways of being.

And here we are in this biology classroom – the coalface of the way young people are socialised to think about nature and our own species. Evolution as a theory has been misused as a linear progress narrative and as a way of naturalising existing hierarchies. When biology is used in conjunction with a fixed, a-temporal idea of nature and its relation to culture, of course it becomes a language of oppression. The frame around this scientific field surely needs to be

dismantled and redrawn in its relation to other forms of knowledge production, but as we do so, we should keep the methods, ideas and knowledge that are useful to us!

Now I’m going to hand out a series of four questions to answer with the person sitting next to you. The idea is to answer them quickly, because we don’t have so much time, so just two minutes for each question. I will tell you when two minutes is up by opening and closing the blinds like this. When I do that, move onto the next question.

1. Look together at one of the models, specimens, diagrams or posters on display in the room.
2. Consider its inclusion in this room, as a room where young people learn about certain kinds of systems. Identify something useful about it, or perhaps you prefer to describe something aesthetic about it that you find interesting, beautiful or important.
3. Identify something limiting about it – something about the way it represents other things; about the choice of information it conveys; or about the way in which it is displayed that forecloses some other information about that object or system that could be useful, interesting, beautiful or important.
4. Imagine a small way of making it differently, or something that could be added to it, so that your answer to question no. 2 is kept, but so that the limitation you identified is redressed or approached differently.

Question to the group: Would anyone like to share their idea for an alteration to an object in the room? We have time to hear from a couple of people.

As we end, I’d like to thank If I Can’t Dance and especially Susan Gibb for supporting my project To Become Two and in particular the film project Our Future Network, which we are working on closely together at the moment.