



Hipatia Press  
www.hipatiapress.com



Instructions for authors, subscriptions and further details:

<http://generos.hipatiapress.com>

## Luce Irigaray's Aesthetic

Linda Daley<sup>1</sup>

1) Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University. Australia.

Date of publication: February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Edition period: February 2014 - June 2014

---

**To cite this article:** Daley, L.M. (2014). Luce Irigaray's Aesthetic. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 3(1), 373-395. doi: [10.4471/generos.2014.34](https://doi.org/10.4471/generos.2014.34)

**To link this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.447/generos.2014.34>

---

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The terms and conditions of use are related to the Open Journal System and to [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (CC-BY).

# Luce Irigaray's Aesthetic

Linda Margaret Daley

*Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University*

## Abstract

---

In this paper I examine some key texts in philosopher Luce Irigaray's oeuvre that I name her aesthetic of sexual difference. Her aesthetic emerges both from critical engagements with women artists and with theories of subjectivity formation and cultural formation. I argue that for Irigaray, art-making has an essential role in the thinking and practice of sexual difference. I also argue that because Irigaray reconfigures the terms on which aesthetics traditionally relies, that her aesthetic is methodologically indicative, rather than substantively prescriptive, of how sexual difference and sexuate culture might be represented.

---

**Keywords:** Irigaray, sexual difference, art, painting, sensation



# Estética de Luce Irigaray

Linda Margaret Daley

*Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University*

## Resumen

---

En este artículo examino algunos textos clave en la obra de la filósofa Luce Irigaray, que he denominado como su estética de la diferencia sexual. Su estética surge tanto de compromisos críticos con las artistas y con las teorías de la formación de la subjetividad y la formación cultural. Sostengo que para Irigaray, la creación artística tiene un papel esencial en el pensamiento y la práctica de la diferencia sexual. También sostengo que debido a que Irigaray reconfigura los términos en los que la estética tradicional se basa, su estética es metodológicamente indicativa, más que sustantivamente prescriptiva, de cómo podrían ser representadas diferencia sexual y cultura sexuada.

---

**Palabras clave:** Irigaray, diferencia sexual, arte, pintura, sensación

*Is not art a means of creating reality and not only of reproducing it?*

*Art is a daily task for each one of us, and sexuate belonging is the most crucial dimension that art has to work out.*

*We need art to enter into relationships, especially sexuate relationships. More generally, we need art to cultivate our sensorial perceptions and give to us a dynamic global unity, thanks to a creative imagination.*

*(Irigaray, 2004c, p. 97-99)*

*'Transforming our needs into desire requires the mediation of art: in our gestures, in our words, in all our ways of relating to ourselves, to the other(s), to the world.'*

*(Irigaray, 2013, p. 22)*

In 'A Natal Lacuna,' Luce Irigaray condemns German surrealist writer and visual artist Unica Zürn's (1916-1970) work as evidence of her 'failure to be born' as both artist and woman (1994, p. 13). For Irigaray, Zürn's paintings and drawings express a negative relation to herself and the world through images that reflect the prescribed position for women under patriarchy: as formless 'other' to man. In addition to the rarity in her *oeuvre* of commenting on a particular artist's work, the essay is significant for being one of the first places where Irigaray articulates her aesthetic. She says: 'These enquiries [into Zürn's work] are not a judgement on any one artist or group of artists, nor even on an epoch, but represent a question about art' (1994, p. 12).

The essay provoked a rejoinder from its translator, feminist scholar Margaret Whitford, who describes Irigaray's early and inspiring relation with feminist artists as a source of 'creative misunderstanding' in the light of the Zürn piece (1994, p. 15-17). Whitford claims Irigaray makes a number of remarks about Zürn's art that can be extrapolated to define her aesthetic as prescriptively conservative: art is a necessary means toward an end, rather

than an end in itself; the artistic product is more important than the artistic process; within the arts there is a hierarchy: images are more important than words; among the possibilities of image-making, artists should aspire to the figurative rather than the abstract, and express forms that show ‘beauty’ (‘repose,’ ‘unity,’ ‘harmony’) rather than ‘ugliness’ (‘void,’ ‘chaos,’ ‘dereliction,’ ‘fragmentation’) (Whitford, 1994, p. 13-15). Whitford says readers fail to notice Irigaray’s stress on the death drive in her philosophy, which views these drives as forces in *both* their destructiveness *and* their creativity, albeit organised by cultural structures rather than natural instincts and therefore potentially available to transformation (1994, p. 16). Men rather than women have the symbolic resources for sublimating the dangerous nature of the death drive, whereas women are lacking these symbolic resources. Indeed, Irigaray says women function as the means for men’s sublimation, and thus his creativity occurs at her expense. Zürn’s psychic pain, which in moments of reprieve provided material for her art and writing, also led to her eventual suicide. According to Whitford, Irigaray’s analysis of Zürn’s art and her autobiographical account of her relation with her artist partner, Hans Bellmer, expresses in microcosm her theories of woman’s deadly relation to patriarchy.

In a further rejoinder, feminist art critic Hilary Robinson takes both Irigaray and Whitford to task for their failure to attend to the specificities of Zürn as an artist working in inks and oils, and their privileging of a literary model of creativity in reading her visual work (1994, p. 20). Robinson claims that Whitford has a misplaced expectation of Irigaray as a critic, and that Irigaray’s writing is of ‘rich, productive and direct benefit to feminist artists’ (1994, p. 20). I agree with Robinson’s conclusion, but many questions still hover over this exchange of views. How should readers of Irigaray’s radical philosophy of sexual difference respond to her comments on art? Should we agree with Whitford’s assessment that Irigaray’s criteria for art are necessarily conservative when placed within her politically radical philosophy? Do Irigaray’s early views on art (‘A Natal Lacuna’ was originally published in 1985) continue in her later writings on art and painting? How might women art-makers negotiate Irigaray’s writings (including those on art) and their own particular medium of creative expression? Given that art and politics have always had an impossible relationship, why should Irigaray’s writings escape that fate? In sum: to what

extent is this now twenty-year old debate in the *Women's Art Magazine* simply a curious artefact of an early – and now surpassed? – Anglophone reception in Irigaray studies? Or does it encapsulate the issues of a continuing theme given Irigaray's many references to art, artistry and artistic processes in her philosophy up to the present?

This essay examines Irigaray's writings on art and particularly her remarks on the relation of painting to sexual difference. I claim that Irigaray's reference to 'beauty' is a transformed aesthetic criterion describing a reconnection between the natural and cultural dimensions of sexual difference. Her writings on art indicate *both* a means *and* an expression of an inventive encounter between the two sexes that have yet to exist, rather than a perspective on art (and its prized goal of beauty) where art is understood as nature's opposite and its very negation. Irigaray has no theoretical or practical interest in expanding the discourse of aesthetics or of critically interpreting the works of women artists within art history's disciplinary framework. She is not interested in the work of art as an *object* of pleasure, or as a value according to an aesthetic style, nor in the artistic *subject's* will to create. It is that very subject/object division that aesthetics has traditionally relied upon and her philosophy aims to overcome.

In the several, and sometimes cryptic, remarks Irigaray makes about colour and its necessary (although by no means exclusive) relation to painting, I locate Irigaray's aesthetic of sexual difference. It is an aesthetic that emerges from and also escapes the meeting with phenomenological and psychoanalytic frameworks, each of which has investments in theorizing a monosexual model of subjectivity through art and painting. In Irigaray's philosophy, 'beauty' names the (im) possibility for thinking nature's and culture's reconnection in the self-defined becoming of woman, thereby transforming the understanding of both nature and culture. I also argue that Irigaray's references to painting have less to do with critiques of representations of women *in* art as rather her turning toward the painter's task to think through the materiality of their medium, which is analogous to philosophy's problem in thinking sexual difference. For Irigaray, sexual difference is not only the organising concept in her philosophy, it is also the philosophical problem of our era *par excellence* (1993b, p. 5). Before I address the status of art and painting in her writing, I turn to her concept of sexual difference.

### Sexual difference, sexuate culture

Irigaray explicitly rejects the label ‘feminist’ to describe her theoretical aims, preferring women’s, and more so, humanity’s liberation (See Irigaray, 2002a, p. 67). Central to her idea of liberation is the concept of sexual difference, an ontological category constitutively philosophical, political and ethical (Grosz, 2012, p. 70). Conventional accounts explaining the differences between the sexes do so according to one of three typical models: where women and the feminine are either opposite, complementary or equal to men and the masculine. By contrast, sexual difference as Irigaray accounts for it is premised on a notion of difference where the terms woman/man; women/men; feminine/masculine do not pre-exist their difference and do not invoke a hierarchy between the terms. Irigaray says ‘who or what the other is, I never know. But the other who is forever unknowable is the one who differs from me sexually’ (1993b, p. 13). ‘She’ is different to ‘he’ in a mode that is of another order to the difference ‘he’ is from ‘she:’ the difference is non-reciprocal as well as non-hierarchical. It is a model of difference based on two sexes that are irreducible to each other.

Irigaray uses the word ‘sexuate’ to describe a positively defined feminine identity that does not currently exist within patriarchy and phallocentrism. It refers to the bodily, psychical and cultural dimensions of feminine (and implicitly, masculine) being that for woman is reconceived from her negative and sexually neutral status within phallocentrism to a positive, sexually different status. ‘Sexuate’ refers not simply to anatomical or genital differences between men and women (although it does include these and what they enable) as if this difference were some kind of essence to sexual identity or a grounding principle of sexual being. Rather, ‘sexuate’ identity incorporates a transfigured conception of being’s identity that comprises dimensions that are *morphological* (bodily in the widest sense of a living form), *perceptual* (in terms of the sensate perspective a sexed being has of self, others and the world) and *associative* qualities (the kinds of relations that are possible for sexually different beings) (Grosz, 2012, p. 70). These dimensions of being as relational, bodily and perspectival override the possibility of reducing Irigaray’s account of sexual difference as biologically essentialist or heterosexist. In Irigaray’s more recent writings, she speaks of the productive encounter between sexuate beings involving the creation of a

third being, which cannot be reduced to the production of a child, nor a privileging of the heterosexual couple: 'the real exists as at least three: a real corresponding to the masculine subject, a real corresponding to the feminine subject, and a real corresponding to their relation. These three reals thus each correspond to a world, but these three worlds are in interaction' (2002b, p. 111). Some feminists of difference have read Irigaray's work subsequent to her early and predominantly critical interventions as regressively heterosexist (Butler & Cornell, 1998). However, Irigaray is explicit in not reducing the couple to a familial unit of reproduction: 'Maternity – giving birth to a child – should remain an extra ... surplus to any morphology' (1994, p. 13). The tantalising nature of the third being would be an inventive becoming of opening and closing the limits within, and mediating the encounter between, two sexuate beings who have yet to exist culturally.

Sexual difference is real, but it is not reality. It is a difference that does not accord with any existent identity or term. The ontological dynamic of being's identity as a mode of becoming that Irigaray's concept necessitates is not permissible under the Aristotelian logic of ontology that needs being to be either A or not-A. Within this logic, a being is defined according to a grouping of dominant characteristics comprising its identity/term as a universal category (A), or according to the absence of those (other being's) characteristics in order for this being to belong to a universal identity foreign to its singularity (not-A). For Irigaray, sexuate being is a mode of becoming other than how feminine identity is defined according to this dominant logic, by becoming in different moments of encounter with self and other through the various dimensions of woman's (and implicitly, man's) singularly sexuate being. Irigarayan sexuate difference and the culture of worlds that it would make possible, is a radically transformed understanding of Aristotelian ontology.

Irigaray claims that in order for her radical ontology to be thought, the coordinates regulating the real of what *is* (i.e. regulating reality) – those of spatiality and temporality – need to be reconfigured along with the relation of form to matter (1993b, p. 7). A sexuate culture requires a change in our understanding of perception and of the inhabiting of place so that femininity is not figured as space, and masculinity figured as time as they are under patriarchy and phallogentrism (1993b, p. 7; see also Olkowski, 2000). Woman must not be figured as space for man to achieve his accession to



subjectivity and thus to History; woman must not be outside her internal and external relation to time and thus figured as what History cannot admit *as woman* (Irigaray, 2002b, p. 121-122). Woman needs a place proper to herself by having a limit or point of return within herself, and in not being the place of limit for man as she is within patriarchy. To achieve this rethinking of the ‘whole economy of space-time,’ and the relation of matter to form, Irigaray must look to the resources both within and outside philosophy for the reconfiguration of sexed being to take place (1993b, p. 11). Irigaray’s philosophy of sexual difference is (im) possible rather than utopian in the sense that it is an ontologically constituted ethics premised on a real that exists, but which currently has no cultural expression. Irigaray seeks methods, techniques and practices, along with concepts, with which to think that expression. How art participates in the discovery and expression of sexual difference is what remains to be considered in this paper. How, for example, does the visual medium of painting enable an approach, a technique, a method that gives expression to what not only does not exist in reality, but must also of necessity remain ‘ forever unknowable’? What do modernist painters’ preoccupation with vision and perception offer to Irigaray’s philosophy? How does the material of colour, its handling and applications unique to each painter, participate in making visible the invisible sensations that must become perceptible in the encounter that is yet to happen, and of which Irigaray describes as a ‘field of forces’ the two sexes generate (2002b, p. 108).

Before turning to these questions, we need to consider the necessity of transforming the relation of form to matter to see its relevancy to the task of painting sexual difference. Irigaray has analysed the traditional relation in Western thought of matter to form and its sexual *indifference* to woman through her critique of the place of fluids within theories of solids. The morpho-logic of phallogentrism requires that what is counted as real has to conform to that logic which reflects the morphological qualities of the masculine sex (‘production, property, order, form, unity, visibility, erection’) (1985b, p. 77). Fluids are analogous to woman’s subjectivity within this patriarchal logic: woman, like fluids, cannot be counted as real or having a reality of her own that can be formalised on her own terms because the real of her being, like that of fluids, is of another order of logic to that of phallogentrism and its discourses of symbolisation. Irigaray reminds us that

ontology presumes (a) form that gives a shape, dimension(s) and substance to matter, and therefore presumes a logic of relation between the matter/material of what is (contained) within its form. The analogy between the resistance to formalisation of fluidity with woman's being is that the universal, abstracted logic unifying reality which underpins phallocentrism refuses the 'indefinite and the in-finite *form* [that] is never complete' in her being (1985a, p. 229). Fluidity, like solids, names physical reality and includes internal frictions, pressures, and movements 'continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusible ... unending, potent and impotent owing to its resistance to the countable' (1985c, p. 111). Fluids participate within, across, and through the walls of solids; they are not contained by the logic that erects the 'solid/fluid' hierarchical pairing, and undermine that opposition in fluids' refusal to be in one *or* other place, conforming to one *or* other form. As fluids are to theories of mechanics, so too is woman's being to symbolisation within the phallogentric morphologic: woman's form is Not One. Woman does not belong to *a* form that would be geometrically placed in space and mathematically countable like the solid object in space.

Irigaray seeks forms that do not conform to the logic of mathematization, of quantification. In ways that are analogous to fluids and fluidity, colour participates in Irigaray's philosophy because, as Ludwig Wittgenstein reminds us, conceptually, colour is in excess of any attempt to order its physical reality to a system or schema (n.d. 16e). Irigaray links her critique of the dominant logic of forms to colour. The patriarchal forms in which women have always existed are inappropriate to feminine identity, and, says Irigaray, we must break out of them through 'acts of liberation' which may enable us to discover colour ... what's left of life beyond forms ..... When all meaning is taken away from us, there remains color, colors, in particular those corresponding to our sex ... (1993c, p. 109). Ontologically, colour has multiple forms of affectivity both natural and cultural that are transformative: for example, in animal and plant life, forms that enable attractions and repulsions within and across species; in the spiritual domain of some cultures showing relations between inside and outside, and it has forms in painting that are transformations of relations between perceptual and pictorial space, and in rendering visible the nonvisible forces as these affect subjectivity's becoming. Colour does not conform to mathematization,

to quantity and abstraction; it is pure quality. It is in this context that Irigaray looks to art, artists and art practices to find forms and transformations with colour, and the thinking that painters have brought to their material.

I agree with Whitford's warning that Irigaray's essay on Zürn speaks of a prescriptive role for artists. However, it is less clear that Irigaray privileges figurative rather than abstract compositions, nor that art offers an end in itself rather than a means toward and an expression of sexuate culture. It is likely that her Zürn essay gives little encouragement to practicing artists who seek to give figurative representation in their work to the pain and suffering of sexual *indifference*. However, if we read other of Irigaray's references to art and painting back into this early essay we can also hear her articulation of a reconfigured ontology necessary for sexuate subjectivity and culture, and the artistry required of and enabled by sexuate subjectivity that is not confined to the practices of the professional artist. We can also hear an aesthetic that returns art to life and its becomings rather than to forms of reality and their judgements within art history. Within a few years of the Zürn piece, indeed, contemporaneous with its translation into English, Irigaray directly addresses some of the elusive relations of colour to form, and of painting's essential relation to colour that she overlooks in her analysis of Zürn's art.

### **Colour, painting, and 'a new kind of philosophy'**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is unique among the early phenomenologists in aiming to get 'to the things themselves' in a pre-reflective manner by way of the perceiving body. From his philosophy of embodied perception he develops the concept of 'the flesh' that is central to his non-dualist, non-mechanistic account of subjectivity which relies heavily on painters to advance and illustrate. For Irigaray, given that woman has traditionally been on the subordinate side of dualist thinking – mind/body; spirit/flesh; subject/object –the phenomenologist's philosophy of the flesh offers great potential for the development of her own philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty pays close attention to René Descartes's views on painting and its relation to colour in inaugurating his philosophy away from Cartesian 'operationalism' claiming it assumes pre-reflective contact with a

'tacit cogito' which his phenomenology targets (1962, p. 402). For Descartes, colour had been understood as a secondary quality to the quantity of *res extensa*, and contributes to the simulacra detrimental and redundant to representation. Like other inessential sensory qualities, colour has laws that are inaccessible to vision, and vision for Descartes is dominant among the senses. Although vision depends on colour to make the discriminations worthy of its place in the sensorium, for the early modern metaphysician, colour-judgements will lead to error. The percipient views colour as inhering in the property of the thing rather than in a relation between the percipient and the perceived. Descartes's optics also views vision as passive and cannot account for the optical laws of colour perception: light and colour are signs instituted by nature to which humans do not have the code to read its laws. Descartes's expressed preference for the (non-coloured) graphic arts to that of painting, encapsulates for the phenomenologist the monochrome and machine-like model of techno-rationalist thinking that dominates all dimensions of his metaphysics in its grasping, mastering, and objectifying operations of rationalist thought. As colour is ontologically essential to painting, for Merleau-Ponty it cannot be treated as a mere secondary quality, and has instead the capacity of 'leading us somewhat closer to "the heart of things;"' that is, to that pre-reflective contact with being (1993b, p. 141).

Merleau-Ponty focuses on how post-impressionist Paul Cézanne (in his writings as well as his paintings) is able to create a modulation of relations between things on the canvas, not by giving priority to line that would contain the thing within a determined form. Rather, the artist creates a form that is achieved through giving representation on the canvas to a mode of pre-reflective or 'lived' perception that is prior to the perception that consciousness organises into a perceptual unity of objects in a spatial field (1993a, p. 64). Cézanne's thought and practice is applauded by Merleau-Ponty on two counts. First, in representing on the canvas a way of seeing the world so that the contour or form of the thing is rendered as it emerges to our vision. As Merleau-Ponty says: 'Cézanne follows the swelling of the object ... one's glance captures a shape that emerges from among them all, just as it does in perception' (1993a, p. 65). Cézanne's canvas depicts the practically imperceptible movement of the various phenomenological dimensions of lived perception. It is the perceptual experience as 'lived' in its immediacy with and immersion in the world that intertwines seer with seen. Of his art,

Merleau-Ponty says: 'in reality we see a form which oscillates around the ellipse without being an ellipse' (1993a, p. 64). The pictorial effect is not a thing presented as a single outline sacrificing the thing's depth, but rather a thing that is presented as 'an inexhaustible reality full of reserves' (1993a, p. 65). Second, Merleau-Ponty admires Cézanne for perfecting a method for achieving that movement of pre-reflective perceptual vision through the modulation of colours and their relations on the canvas. The priority Cézanne gives to colour (over line) results in colour blurring with line making the two painterly resources dissolve in order to achieve a spatial structure that 'vibrates' in the thing's representation on the canvas. In that 'vibration,' says Merleau-Ponty, 'we see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects ... the presence ... which for us is the definition of the real' (1993a, p. 65). The painter's thought and practice achieves a method for pictorial space that has its parallel in what Merleau-Ponty is seeking phenomenologically: a tactile sense of vision; a mode of vision that is chiasmically rather than dualistically understood as the embodied relation of a self to the world.

In Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'the flesh,' he conceives a more primordial formulation of embodied perception understood as the condition of both seeing and being seen, and of touching and being touched (1968, p. 147). Sight and touch have a fundamental and necessary interaction for perception, and they are common to, and the condition of, both the subject and the object in being a single 'thing' folded back on itself (1968, p.147). Again, the ontology of colour is crucial to the phenomenologist's project to undermine dualist structures of thought. To use Merleau-Ponty's example: the Red is seen and felt as a 'certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world – less a colour or a thing, therefore, than the difference between things and colours, a momentary chrySTALLISATION of coloured being or visibility' (1968, p. 132). The red separates from, to continue Merleau-Ponty's example, the dress, to connect with other reds that neighbour it, and form a constellation or field of reds that gives, in another moment of sensation, the dress in its form as thing-like and ultimately as object. His concept of the flesh is an element of being with the capacity to fold in on itself, to face inward toward the self, as well as outward toward other things and beings, and express the sensation of being as it is lived. His example of the double sensation of one hand touching and being touched by the other in a single

fold of two hands illustrates this inward and outward interface of the modulations connecting and reversing subject and object, whereby a body can be both and at once subject and object within the same field of visibility (1968, p. 134). The flesh expresses the shimmering or quivering of the visual sense felt on the eye as the difference that connects and disconnects colour to and from the thing. More so than any other element in his account of the flesh, colour has an ontological status for Merleau-Ponty of being the '*exemplar sensible*' in that it both gives itself as a being, and is the condition of Being (1968, p. 135).

Irigaray says Merleau-Ponty's philosophy 'almost mistakes itself for a phenomenology of painting or of the art of painting' (1993b, p. 175). In spite of his philosophy's advance beyond dualist, mechanistic subjectivity, Irigaray's several engagements with his philosophy demonstrate how his phenomenology still retains the domination of vision within the sensorium through a reliance on maternal and feminine metaphors of experience, but does so while ignoring the real of women's bodies. Woman's maternal and feminine elements of her being, complicate his phenomenology of the flesh, which ultimately maintains a monosexual conception of embodiment and of the flesh's relation to the world (1993b, p. 177). I take Irigaray's criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'the flesh' and the visible/invisible dynamic in turn.

Irigaray begins her critique of Merleau-Ponty in her chapter, 'The Invisible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm"' in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993b), develops it further in 'Flesh Colors' in *Sexes and Genealogies* (1993a) and again in 'To Paint the Invisible' (2004b). Irigaray is critical of Merleau-Ponty's references to feminine attributes such as fluidity (through metaphors such as 'between the sea and the strand'); references to female desire (with the comment: 'the telepathy of the visible when a woman knows her body to be desirable without even seeing those who look at her'); and to woman's body ('Pregnancy, *Gestalt*, phenomenon – represent a getting into contact with being as pure *there is*' (1968, p. 245; 206). While pregnancy is the word for Merleau-Ponty that 'gives' the pure givenness of the *there is*, he overlooks the particular entwinement of the flesh of the maternal body and its complication to his theory of visibility and invisibility in the relation between mother and fetus. His references to the

red of the woman's dress ignores the more primordial red of her blood, let alone the white of her milk, or the colour of the fetus's eyes that have a different relation again to the light and to the inside and outside of a field of sensation (Irigaray, 1993b, p.156).

Merleau-Ponty's claim of reversibility of sight and touch may work for man, but not so readily for woman. The experience of tactility for and between the fetus and the mother is not a relation of reversibility that he proposes, and in terms of the senses' reversibility, it is likewise not of the order of symmetry in that mother and fetus have a relation to their lived experience of spatiality *vis a vis* each other that is not reducible to sight (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 160). In the maternal relation, tactility has more of a relation to the sense of hearing than to vision (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 160). To Merleau Ponty's hand-touching-hand allegory of the reversible positioning of active and passive sensation, Irigaray proposes the two lips where one is not dominant and grasping by one of the other, but remains in constant intimacy and is in woman's body, already doubled sensation (1993b, p. 167)

The world that Merleau-Ponty describes as symbiotic with a sensible self, Irigaray describes as 'solitary and solipsistic:' an inward and outward movement of a masculine subject that forgets the prior movement of symbiosis of fetus and placenta (2004b, p. 394). From Irigaray's perspective, Merleau-Ponty's conception of world is a substitute for the even more primordial realm of the placenta, the sensible realm to which all human beings have a relation as the first 'lived experience' of co-belonging and co-existing. The placenta is an organ that undertakes an intermediating role between mother and fetus by performing functions that benefit both beings while also being relatively autonomous of each: supplying blood and nutrients to the fetus and secreting hormones to the mother ceased by the ovaries during gestation (1993c, p. 39). Unlike the current cultural imaginary of the fetus as *either* fused with the mother *or* as a foreign body cannibalising its host, the biological reality of the placenta is a prized sensible-transcendental term (invisible/visible in Merleau-Ponty's) for rethinking the intermediation of the third being of sexuate identities.

In 'To Paint the Invisible' Irigaray spells out the role of painting and the painter that she had begun in her earlier essays as more explicitly a relation to invisibility. Drawing out the understanding of the monosexual invisibility in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, Irigaray refines her understanding of its role

for her own enterprise. Invisibility for the phenomenologist cannot be posited in dualist terms in expressing the intelligible of the sensible understood as a mutual interaction and intertwining in and of the flesh. Alphonso Lingis, translator of *The Visible and the Invisible*, explains the invisible as the 'wild *Logos*' that does not constitute a set of principles or laws, but rather a system of levels posited in the sensible field by our body (1968, p. li). The invisible offers a cognitive unity or the intelligibility by means of which sensible things are distributed in a field according to proximity or distance, and differentiated according to qualities or intensities. He adds: 'like the light, these levels and dimensions [of the sensible], this system of lines of force, are not *what* we see; they are that *with which*, *according to which*, we see' (Lingis, 1968, p. li). The invisible is the field that unfolds the visible of sensible being.

Citing Paul Klee, whose well known formula: *the painter's task is not to render the visible as rather render visible*, Irigaray refines her account of what constitutes the invisibility of the flesh for sexual difference, and implicates the role of painting in its actualisation. Whereas in her chapter in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray names the invisible as the maternal-feminine, in an interview preceding her later essay, she refers to the invisible as 'relations between us and the world, us and the other(s)' (1993b, p. 173; 2004a, p. 395). Irigaray progressively refines her understanding of the invisible of sexuate difference from terms that do not exist in the imaginary and symbolic orders to terms for expressing the ontological real of woman and of her series of relations that are constitutive of her being and for which she seeks forms that do not yet exist. The current phase of Irigaray's writings comes to increasingly focus on real forces that are non-human and inorganic in comprising the contours of these relations to the world(s) in which we co-belong. These worlds are of another order of relation to the single world Merleau-Ponty's flesh outlines (see Irigaray 2013; 2002b; 2004b). The ethical dimension of her ontology of sexual difference therefore expands the ontology of her ethics beyond any bodily limit of 'lived experience' [*Erlebnis*] of phenomenological inquiry. Irigaray says: 'the ability to be at the same time seeing and seen, touching and touched, does not seem to be specifically human' (2004b, p. 397). The 'specifically human' is insufficient for defining relations with the world and others, or sufficient in characterising 'becoming human' (see Irigaray, 2002b, p. 117-133). In



‘Flesh Colors,’ Irigaray describes these non-human forces of the real on sexed beings in reference to the invisible forces of light waves and sound waves in producing the perceptual field prior to the language in which perceptions would be interpreted, and these forces have different affective modalities on the perceptual capacities of the subjects according to their sex (2004b, p. 397). Irigaray folds back Merleau-Ponty’s thought onto itself seeking not so much to preserve his conception of a flesh that materially provides the support for both vision and thought, but of opening ‘another relation between flesh, vision and thought’ (2004b, p. 390).

Irigaray’s relation to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is equivocal yet she does not repudiate phenomenology even when questioned about its value to her work (Irigaray, 2008, p. 129-132). Rather, she adapts the concept of ‘the flesh’ to other contexts such as the clinical practice of psychoanalysis and destabilises both practice and theory and the relation between the two. Irigaray’s own relation to psychoanalysis is also well known for being highly equivocal, however, she has been a practicing psychoanalyst herself and views psychoanalysis as having the potential for transformation because it is the ‘scene that calls the very condition of representation into question’ (2002c, p. 193). Irigaray considers the ‘drama of analysis’ as theatrical in its incorporation of the physical props, gestures or the bodily posture(s) of its actors, and the verbal and non-verbal exchanges of speaker/listener: a setting that ‘corresponds to an optical illusion’ (2002c, p. 199; p. 201). She argues the classical setting of the encounter creates an artificial reality that places the analysand in a ‘blind’ and ‘supine’ orientation toward the analyst and therefore disoriented from her immediate, and particularly, visual perceptions. The sensory deprivation of both actors is further described in terms of the disequilibrium of sound and light waves affecting the analysand’s perceptual capacities. Irigaray prescribes to her colleagues (the essay was originally delivered as a lecture to a professional conference) that the solution to this disequilibrium between the nonhuman speeds of light and sound forces and the disorientation between human actors is ‘*to paint.*’ Her point is not only to reorientate the position of the actors (side-by-side and vertical rather than back-to-front and vertical/horizontal) in the encounter and who may be same or other sex to each other. Her aim is also to provide another form to the expression of those perceptual affects through a non-linguistic medium. Irigaray claims the different speeds of light and sound

(waves) are the conditions of vision and hearing (that is, conditions of the perceptual field) between subjects, but the different speeds of this 'physical matter' of real, invisible and non-human forces puts speech/listening out of balance, and leads to the analysand's inability to integrate the present in the past, and the past into the present and the future. Irigaray says: 'we need to give back to each sense the objective and subjective speeds of its current perceptions and facilitate harmony between these, and the past, present, and future history of the subject' (1993a, p. 156). Citing Paul Klee, she says that painting in the therapeutic encounter would '*spatialize perception and make time simultaneous*' (1993a, p. 155). Against Freud's (untheorised) *practice* of the 'talking cure' and his *theory* of the death drive (that women fail to sublimate) as the necessary prerequisite for a transition to culture, Irigaray overlays these Freudian insights with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to radically surpass both knowledge domains. And painting as key to her strategy.

Freud examines sublimation of the death drives in a number of places in his writings, but it is his connection of the subject's psychical processes to the founding of social organization that has relevance to Irigaray's imperative that women must learn 'the art of genital sublimation' (1993a, p. 165). Sublimation is a psychical process consisting of the abandonment of an erotic aim and taking on another that is social. Freud argues that ability to sublimate bodily drives and their manifestation in affects, representations and artistic practices is the source of human civilization and creativity (1961, p. 82). Without this ability, he says, we lose the basis for creating meaning for our own lives, and we remain unhappy or outside culture. Freud offers some suggestions for overcoming the arbitrariness of the opportunity to sublimate, such as devoting one's life to artistic production. However, as these means involve either social supports and/or conditions that are not universally available – he cites artistic genius for example – he proposes other measures. He suggests sexual love and beauty, each of which is universally available (Freud, 1961, p. 82). Regarding beauty, he adds, there is no 'obvious use or cultural necessity [for it] and yet civilization could not do without it' (1961, p. 82). Connecting the means of happiness to the creation of culture as a mode of creativity, Freud explains the archaic origin of culture as the redirection of sexual drives from natural aims, in the first instance, from their maternal origin, and then secondarily their homosexual

desire, to compete among men by urinating on the threatening flames of fire. However, when these drives of homosexual competition were redirected to another aim, thereby taming yet another desire of nature, culture came into being for which the continued sublimation of (homo)sexual aims would ensure its progression. Freud claims that due to women's anatomical deficiency for dousing the flames, her role was to be the guardian of the fire. In Freudian theory, then, woman's genitals represent a double handicap in being neither beautiful nor culturally productive, merely *re-productive*. To which Irigaray replies:

‘This imperative of genital sublimation [something that we women have either forgotten or never learned the art of] solves the dilemma of art for art's sake. If art is a necessary condition for the establishment of a culture of affective relationships, and especially sexual relationships, then art is useful as a place where individual, bodily matter can be transmuted and sublimated. Art is not just an aid to a social body that has already been abstracted from the sexual dimension ... Without art, sexuality falls into a natural immediacy that is bound up with reproduction and into infinite particles’ (1993a, p. 165).

We know from Merleau-Ponty that colour can be a mode of access to ‘pre-discursive experience’ (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 151) and that for him painting (that is, rendering with colour), unlike drawing, is a mode of expression more appropriate to making intelligible that sensible experience than is the mode of spoken language. It is also an expression which produces in the psychoanalytic clinical encounter an artefact shared with another, that may be either ephemeral or enduring, but one that would contribute to thinking a *sexuate* culture in the way in which Freud speaks of artistic activity as a necessity of culture's founding and perpetuation. Given that woman's role in monosexual economies of culture have been caught between her value as a use and as an exchange – as a value of utility even when she is a sign of value – the production of a woman-defined culture through the creation of non-utilitarian production of art would seem to be a necessary precondition of Irigaray's *sexuate* culture (see Daley, 2012).

Irigaray directs her complex reading of inter-subjectivity and sexual identity in ‘Flesh Colors’ through painting in the clinical context, and is also

making a larger claim for women's creativity to the construction or production of a culture appropriate to her sex: 'This is the indispensable road to take not only for psychoanalysis but, more generally, in every relationship, if we are to realize an art of the sexual that respects the colors, the sounds, and the forms proper to each sex' (1993a, p. 165).

Irigaray is critical of Freud for his theory of sublimation, in refusing women the access to the creation of culture, she is also critical of Freudian theory that forgot its early practice as 'talking cure' when the analyst listened closely to what women were saying and how they were saying it (2002a, p. 208). At a certain historical point in its development as a science, psychoanalysis forgot to listen to women's voices (2002a, p. 203). Significantly, Irigaray is not urging a return to that early kind of listening, as rather a different mode of encounter between analyst and analysand: a sexually different relation to the perceptual field; a sexually different orientation of bodies in the analytical field; a non-linguistic mode of expression that has an essential relation to colour.

### **Rendering the invisible: relations of forces and matter**

We might ask of Irigaray's aesthetic, Why painting? Why is her reconfigured aesthetic focused on the resources of an art form that among all the arts, is possibly the most inherently misogynist in its traditional figuring of woman as muse to the genius (male) artist or as the model of beauty to be represented; where the studio is a physical externalisation of the appropriation of place that Irigaray's analyses repeatedly examine and repudiate (see Pollock, 1992; Schor, 1996)? Why painting rather than say, writing, sculpture, or music? First, painting has an ontological link with colour in a way, as we have seen via Merleau-Ponty and Descartes, other forms of rendering do not. Second, as Irigaray reminds us, colour belongs to nature as well as to culture, and her philosophy seeks methods and techniques for thinking the contexts of their reconnection. Third, since the crisis in representation that photography's arrival created more than one and a half centuries ago, it is painting's task to render visible what is otherwise imperceptible or invisible.

This is all of art's purpose: rather than to give an opinion or make a judgement on the world, that is to represent the world, art's purpose is to

render the aggregations of sensations that our being-in-the-world effects (Deleuze, 2002, p. 31). All art has this task: to give expression to sensations that are ordinarily inhibited from our modalities of perception. In the case of visual perception, Cézanne understood well that his task was to paint the sensation, and that ‘sensation is the master of deformations’ so that when painting links itself to sensation, it ‘ceases to be representative and becomes real’ (Deleuze, 2002, p. 32; p. 40). When art forms give expression to sensation we know that it is neither of the subject nor of the object, but rather *between* subject and object even when the object is an apple. We should heed Deleuze’s understandings of the relations of painters to expressions of the invisible and imperceptible of forces of sensations in their participation in sexual difference. They are close to Irigaray’s aims of seeking to discover the expressive means of rendering the sensations of relations between self and other(s) and self and world(s).

Women need to create the artefacts that would be the symbolic resources to which we can look and with which we can form a feminine imaginary, the lack of which from patriarchy’s perspective, has been cited as preventing her accession to culture, and which are necessary for a sexual culture to be figured. Perhaps more so, women, and not only professional artists, need to view art as a form of *making* in contexts where an enduring artefact may (or may not) emerge, but more importantly one where outside of a solipsistic (and therefore, solitary) form of relation, there might be a rendering of the sensation of the woman-to-woman relation as the opportunity for a double creation; of rendering visible what is either currently formless or inappropriately man’s form. Irigaray says ‘making has seldom been considered as a work carried out *inside* subjectivity’ (emphasis added, 2002b, p. 115). By ‘inside’ here, Irigaray is talking of women’s need to turn inward toward herself, to form a relation of spacing within herself from which she can create herself through her relation(s) with other women. I take this necessity of the internal movement of self-affection to be what Irigaray determined Unica Zürn did not achieve. What appears in that early essay of Irigaray’s as art criticism is Irigaray’s analysis of women under patriarchy. When art can be viewed as *making* at least as much as the *made*, the essential space-time reconfiguration of sexual difference enables the rendering of what is invisible to patriarchy, and sets the scene for a sexual culture to come.

## References

- Butler, J., Cornell, D., Cheah, P., & Grosz, E. (1998). The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell. *Diacritics*, 28(1), 19-42.
- Daley, L. (2012). Luce Irigaray's Sexuate Economy. *Feminist Theory*, 13:1, 59-79. doi: [10.1177/1464700111429903](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700111429903)
- Deleuze, G. (2002) *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*. Translated by Daniel W. Smith. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN.
- Freud, S. (1961) *Civilisation and Its Discontents*. Edited and translated by James Strachey. Norton Edition: New York.
- Grosz, E. (2012) The Nature of Sexual Difference: Irigaray and Darwin. *Angelaki. Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 17(2), 69-93. doi: [10.1080/0969725X.2012.701049](https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2012.701049)
- Irigaray, L. (2013) *In the Beginning, She Was*. Bloomsbury: London.
- Irigaray, L. (2008) *Conversations*. Luce Irigaray With Stephen Pluháček, Heidi Bostic, Judith Still, Michael Stone, Andrea Wheeler, Gillian Howie, Margaret R. Miles, Laine M. Harrington, Helen A. Fielding, Elizabeth Grosz, Michael Worton, Brigitte H. Midttun. Continuum. London: UK.
- Irigaray, L. (2004a) 'Interview with Helen Fielding preceding "To Paint the Invisible."' Translated by Helen Fielding. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 37, 389-405.
- Irigaray, L. (2004b) 'To Paint the Invisible.' Translated by Helen Fielding. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 37, 389-405.
- Irigaray, L. (2004c) *Key Writings*. Continuum. London: UK.
- Irigaray, L. (2002a) *Dialogues*. Special Issue of *Paragraph*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh.
- Irigaray, L. (2002b) *The Way of Love*. Translated by Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček. Continuum: London, UK.
- Irigaray, L. (2002c) *To Speak Is Never Neutral*. Translated by Gail Schwab. Continuum: London.
- Irigaray, L. (2000) *To Be Two*. Translated by Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc. The Athlone Press: London.

- Irigaray, L. (1996) 'Je—Luce Irigaray: A Meeting with Luce Irigaray' Interview with Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olson, *JAC*, 16:3, 341-361.
- Irigaray, L. (1994) 'A Natal Lacuna.' Translated by Margaret Whitford. *Women's Art Magazine*, 58, May-June, 11-13.
- Irigaray, L. (1993a) *Sexes and Genealogies*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. Columbia University Press: New York.
- Irigaray, L. (1993b) *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY.
- Irigaray, L. (1993c) *Je, Tu, Nous. Toward a Culture of Difference*. Translated by Alison Martin. Routledge: New York.
- Irigaray, L. (1985a) *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY.
- Irigaray, L. (1985b) 'Is the Subject of Science Sexed?' Translated by Edith Oberle. *Cultural Critique*, 1, 73-88.
- Irigaray, L. (1985c) *This Sex Which is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, NY.
- Lingis, A. (1968) 'Translator's Preface,' *The Visible and the Invisible*. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, IL., xl-lvi.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, IL.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, UK.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1993a) 'Cézanne's Doubt,' in Galen A. Johnson (ed.). *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. Northwestern University Press: Evanston: IL., 59-75.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1993b) 'Eye and Mind' in Galen A. Johnson (ed.). *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reade*. Northwestern University Press: Evanston: IL., 121-149.
- Olkowski, D. E. (2000) 'The End of Phenomenology: Bergson's Interval With Irigaray.' *Hypatia*, 15:3, 73-91. doi: [10.1111/j.1527-2001.2000.tb00331.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2000.tb00331.x)
- Pollock, G. (1992) 'Painting, Feminism, History,' in Michele Barrett & Anne Phillips (Eds.). *Destablizing Theory. Contemporary Feminist Debates*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA. 138 -176.

- Schor, M. (1997) *Wet. On Painting, Feminism and Art Culture*. Duke University Press: Durham, NC.
- Whitford, M. (1994a) 'Introduction to "A Natal Lacuna," by Luce Irigaray. *Women's Art Magazine*. 58 (May-June): 11-13.
- Whitford, M. (1994b). 'Woman With Attitude.' *Women's Art Magazine*. 61 (November-December), 15-17.
- Wittgenstein, L. (n.d) *Remarks on Colour*. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe. Translated by Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle. Basil Blackwell: Oxford, UK.

**Linda Daley** School of Media and Communication, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Australia.

**Contact Address:** Direct correspondence to the author at GPO Box 2476, Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia

E-mail address: [linda.daley@rmit.edu.au](mailto:linda.daley@rmit.edu.au)