

Western University

From the Selected Works of Helen A Fielding

October, 2005

This Body of Art: The Singular Plural of the Feminine

Helen A Fielding, *The University of Western Ontario*

This Body of Art: the singular plural of the feminineⁱ

Helen A. Fielding

I will explore the possibility that the feminine, like art, can be thought in terms of Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the singular plural. In *Les Muses*, Nancy claims that art provides for the rethinking of a *technë* not ruled by instrumentality.ⁱⁱ Specifically, in rethinking aesthetics in terms of the debates laid out by Kant, Hegel and Heideggerⁱⁱⁱ, he resituates the ontological in terms of the specificity of the techniques of each particular artwork; each artwork establishes relations particular to its world or worlds. What is at stake in the singular plural is the multiplicity of relations that are lost in the unifying gestures that arise out of radical oppositions. Indeed, it is his critique of oppositions that underlies his refusal to articulate sexual difference; as he explains it, categories such as sexual difference imply a difference between things or substances rather than refer to the rapport between and within them. Sexuality is a differentiating of the self to itself and to others according to multiple gradients and their becomings that we merely represent as masculine/feminine, homo/hetero, and active/passive.^{iv} But these representations do not capture the rapport; they restrict it. Accordingly, there is, for him, no subject, no substance and no limit as such. Indeed, 'the body' represents the totality he struggles against^v; it is "itself replete with parts, organs—each one discrete and each one connected (by arteries, veins, tubes, ligaments) to the others to make up a system, and in turn, an organism".^{vi} This means, for Nancy, that sexuate identity subsists only in the relation, in the meaning that is asserted in the in-between, in the relation as the process of differentiation.

What I would like to show here is that despite Nancy's refusal to acknowledge sexual difference as such, the singular plural resonates with, and could guide our

thinking about, the feminine. Indeed, since the singular plural refers to being as necessarily a being-with, I want to suggest, drawing upon the insights provided by Luce Irigaray^{vii}, that the feminine might be the possibility of the relation itself. Through sketching out my embodied encounter with a particular artwork, I explore here the significance of Nancy's claim that the work of art establishes an alternate way of relating to technē than that elicited by instrumental means. The encounter with the artwork allows for a rethinking of technē that is rooted in the manifest, and in embodiment and not in the endless reproducibility of the representational. Yet what my encounter with this particular work also reveals is that co-existing with the technē of constructing, is that of the cultivating of relations. While the danger of bringing cultivation, embodiment, and relationality together under the banner of the feminine seems risky, I would argue that this belonging together is not one that relies on an ontic essentialism, but is rather, in Heidegger's sense, the belonging together of that which has been excluded from the articulation of the one or the same in this age, and whose inclusion has hardly been thought. Moreover, if we begin to explore the feminine as a singular plural, it would not entail the claim that the feminine has a universal ontological existence as such. Instead, it would require thinking about the feminine as existing only in terms of the plural relations at work amongst particular and material bodies that are themselves not homogeneous. Rather than limiting relations, I want to suggest that an acknowledgement of sexual difference opens up the possibility of relationality itself.

I turn to Canadian artist Barb Hunt's "Antipersonnel", a collection of 58 knitted pink replicas of antipersonnel land mines that was exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the fall of 2001, precisely because it allows me to reflect upon the artwork at work in terms of the feminine as a singular plural. Moreover, this

exhibition confounds any opposition between art and technē^{viii}; it combines the infinite reproducibility that belongs to technique with the connection to the origin that is requisite of art^{ix}. And, as knitted works that at first glance would seem more at home in a “church-basement bazaar”^x, the mines challenge the split between high art and craft that has, in the past, so often delimited the boundary between artworks made by men, and the “so-called minor arts” made by women^{xi}; a division imposed between creation and making^{xii}. Finally, the irreducible plurality of the singular is remarkably exposed in this singular exhibition of the multiple; for, like the antipersonnel land mines they replicate, Hunt’s individual works come in a multitude of shapes, camouflaged as water canteens, little boxes, a child’s toy^{xiii}. The singular work exists only in the gathering of its endless and multiple particularities. Indeed, Hunt’s ongoing project, to knit in various shades of pink and a multitude of stitches, replicas of the two hundred and eighty-one different kinds of antipersonnel land mines in existence, reveals that the work exists through the relations at work between “the independent life of every stitch”^{xiv} and of every single knitted mine^{xv}.

A reflection on Hunt’s knitted antipersonnel landmines, moreover, sheds new light on Nancy’s rethinking of technē as relation in response to the wars that accompany the attempts of states to assert their sovereignty even as, in this age of globalization, the existence of bounded sovereign states no longer seems tenable^{xvi}. Nancy brings into question the dichotomies established in the opposition of the aesthetic product of art to its technical production, and of art to war; for oppositions such as these curtail relations and make possible systems of expansion which never directly touch upon anything and yet wreak destruction. For the ancient Greeks, there was no separation between the production of crafts and that of artworks, between production (*poiësis*) and its know-how (*technē*). However, Nancy argues that the

modern division between “[p]oetry and/or technics”^{xvii}, between the product of art, poiēsis, and the mode of production, technē, effects a unifying tendency since the “multiplicity of the ways in which the work is put to work” is obscured by the polarizing effect of the split between product and production, between the technics of war and its singular effects (Nancy 1996, p. 6/20).

The question for him, then, is how can we think about art as a gathering of the plural, multiple individual artworks in a gesture that neither denies the “irreducible material difference” found in each artwork nor sublates art “in the element of thought”(1996, p. 9/24)^{xviii}? On the one hand, the term art seems indifferent to the multiple yet specific and concrete articulations of artworks. On the other hand, technics is presumed to be plural and multiplied indefinitely (1996, pp. 5-6/18). The differences between the arts such as sculpture, painting, and music cannot be reduced or subsumed under a single concept because they open up in multiple ways the “irreducible plurality of the unity ‘world’” (1996, p. 18/37). Art as such can only be meaningful through the existence of singular works that set to work as artworks.

As Nancy explains, art reveals that the “appearance of a world is always first of all that of phenomena” rather than that of an intellect imposing a world, or intelligibility upon matter (1996, p. 18/37). Color, for example, does not belong to a specific object, but rather to a world of relations. Colors transform when they come into contact with other colors—they subtly shift their hues and tones. Indeed, the pinks of Hunt’s mines radiate against one another. If we stay with the mines, we enter into the level of pink. Levels, Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains in the Phenomenology of Perception, are dimensions or worlds we move into and corporeally take up. The body as the first level, is a gathering of capacities open to the world that allows us to move into a situation and to take it up.^{xix} With Hunt’s land mines, this adjustment is

startling; as one enters the level of pink, the hues of the individual mines begin to differentiate one from another. Pink becomes a world of its own, until eventually, the shades differ so greatly, they become so distinctive, that one realizes one can no longer apply the same word 'pink' to each hue. Pink has become a singular plural of world, indeed of multiple worlds. The art work thus teaches us embodiedly the meaning of the singular plural as a being-with, as a co-existence. The work also reveals the level as a world that is fundamentally sensual. From the other side of the gallery, looking down lengths of rooms through several open corridors, the pinks of the mines continue to glow. But if each pink mine were removed from its gathering of the exhibition, of the work itself, it would lose its glow, and its shade would alter.

We begin to see then how Nancy articulates being in terms of singular relations that cannot be subsumed under any conceptual rubric. There can be no color in general; colors appear only in their particular and contextual manifestations. Nor can color be reduced to language. As Nancy asserts, the empirical is neither a "presumed 'sensuous given'", nor is it a "subject presumed sensuous". Instead, the empirical lies between the one who senses and that which is sensed. This means that "the empirical is the technics of the local, the presentation of place". Art, which relies upon the "detail of its technique ... or art as technique of the detail," can show up color in its specificity at the same time as it reveals that color belongs to its local manifestation (1996, p. 20/41). We cannot then speak of a world of colors because within each world there is a multiplicity of worlds created from each sense-sensed, and each local touch (p. 21/42). From each perspective from which one looks at the mines, for each particular person who brings his or her sensual body to them, there is a multiplicity of affectations. Moreover, each color is not only a "local value", for each one also "combines heterogeneous sensuous values without homogenizing

them: this red is also a thickness, a fluidity, a figure, a movement, a flash of sound, a taste, or an odor” (p. 21/42). A color cannot be separated from its manifestation; the blue of the carpet is this wooly blue. The pink of each singular mine is particular to the texture of its weave and fiber as well as to the worlds evoked by its resonances with the pink mines around it. Color can figure as signification at work in, for example, the flag, or in Merleau-Ponty’s dubious redeployment of “the eternal feminine”^{xx}. However, when color is deployed as such, it moves into the realm of representation rather than that of presentation or patency. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, red represents the eternal feminine as a cognitive imposition of an essential category. In Hunt’s mines, the color pink can ironically signify the feminine and perhaps even evoke the color of flesh; yet this evocation is an execution of the technicity of color that goes beyond the conceptual. There is something that is set to work in the pinks themselves that exceeds the sign^{xxi}.

It is not just the level of pink to which one becomes attuned; the specificity of the individual mines also begins to appear. Even though Hunt seems to have grouped like mines together, each one is distinguished by stitch as well as hue. As they begin to differentiate under my gaze, I find myself drawn to the softness of the wool; indeed, knitted wool is usually worn close to the skin. We don sweaters, scarves, mittens knitted by mothers, sisters, friends. Wool warms and nurtures. It safeguards against the cold. But my touch, separated as it is from the knitted mines by a plexiglas barrier, cannot be fulfilled. Knitting, as one of the feminine “so-called minor arts”, has not traditionally been given a space in art galleries. Hence the mines were placed under plexiglas because the artist and curator feared that viewers, not recognizing them as artworks, would see them as mere extensions of their touch. As mere extension, this touch would prohibit attending to Hunt’s mines as art works and would

collapse the gap required for sense to occur. As Nancy claims, the artwork “makes visible ... what it touches upon and what it at the same time puts to work through tekhne” is that the “unity and uniqueness of a world are, and are nothing but, the singular difference of a touch and of a zone of touch” (1996, p. 19/38). In other words, the art work shows up this cleavage between touch and what is touched, revealing as it does that it is in this gap or space that sense occurs. In doing so an art work creates place; it is not merely localized in space, but it in fact creates the locality itself^{xxii}. The artwork at work hence reveals a reflexivity, a distancing of self from world that occurs when we do not merely perceive, but rather see ourselves seeing. The artwork elicits this reflection upon perception itself (1996, p. 79/132).

Although Nancy begins with the Heideggerian phenomenological insight that things and others become intelligible from within a field of relations, for him, this field is a concrete one, exemplified by the artwork. The artwork, in its materiality, touches on the “trans-immanence of being-in-the-world”, or connections made between things and people. The problem with the phenomenal body, for Nancy, is that it is still governed by the intellect. For the phenomenal body moves into a milieu and takes it up establishing the “synthetic unity and the continuity of a world of life and activity”(1996, p.18/37). From a critical reading of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology we know that there is an inherently conservative aspect to perception, especially when colonized by the intellect as it is in this age. It leans towards a synesthetic unifying of the senses that collapses impossibles; perceptual stimuli that do not fit into our understanding of what we see, or into the field of relations by which things and people become intelligible, are often simply not perceived. An artwork, however, by bringing to the fore the sensuous world, can shake up, disturb, destabilize or deconstruct the “synesthesia imposed by cognitive reflection”. Indeed, for Nancy, it is the

phenomenal body itself that is disturbed or shaken up by art which “isolates or forces there the moment of the world as such....” (Nancy, 1996, p. 18/36-37). Dependent upon breaking open the worlds of senses, art, then, can be no mere projection of the intellect. Hence, it is not caught up in the instrumental goals that would subsume it to “another thing or use”^{xxiii}.

Accordingly, the very plurality of the arts, that is, the fact that the arts engage our senses as worlds, disturbs the “living unity of perception or action” (1996, p. 21/42) Art works break open the logic of perception that, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, will “‘cancel out’ as unreal all stray data” (1962, p. 313/361). If perception occurs through the senses trying to make the sensible world intelligible, it is then shaped by systems of signification that can override the senses themselves. The art work, however, begins with the senses. It “isolates [a sense] so as to force it to be only what it is outside of signifying and useful perception. Art forces a sense to touch itself, to be this sense that it is” (Nancy 1996, p. 21/42). Importantly, isolating a sense is not the same as breaking it down into an abstract sensation. We also know from Merleau-Ponty that sensation only occurs from within a field. We can only sensorially perceive the pinks of these land mines from within the world or level of pinks laid down by the art work. The “original unity of the senses” evoked by the artwork is not the same as the synesthesia produced when the senses are in fact denied, when perceptual information is negated or subsumed under the laying down of a set of equivalences. Rather, as Nancy elaborates, it is a “singular ‘unity’ of a ‘between’ the sensuous domains” (1996, p.23/46). The pinks appear in their luminosity because they co-respond with one another in the setting up of a sensorial world (musical or pictorial) rather than a cognitive system. Although I am not able to

literally touch these mines, my visual perception reveals to me the tactile softness of them.

Hence art, in showing up and intensifying the senses, also “disengages the world from signification”. This disengagement or suspension is touch itself. The artwork, in dislocating “‘common sense’ or ordinary synesthesia”, also breaks up the unity of the senses that disallows difference. Instead, the art work sets to work a response as a co-responsence “from one touch to another” (1996, pp. 22-23/43-45). The interruptions of this synesthesia are a communication between the senses, that shows up each sense to be more intensely the sense that it is. In short, while signification unifies, art as the sense of the world proliferates differences across the senses, but also “across each of them”. There are multiple pinks that pulsate according to softness, cut, tension, stitch, hue, brilliance, texture, roughness and so on (1996, p. 22/44). It is the very materiality of Hunt’s mines which cannot be reduced to this or that which provides the force of the work, and not its cognitive “message” or signification. Despite the informational aspect of the exhibition which offers facts about landmines, the pink mines disengage the senses from signification; the sense of the world that is touched upon is absolutely material.

It is in this rapport between the senses that, for Nancy, sense as meaning is produced. Just as sensation cannot occur in isolation^{xxiv}, so too can meaning only occur when there is a relation between one and the other^{xxv}. Accordingly, the call to reflect is not effected by Hunt’s mines in the sense of the sensual sublated into thought. Rather, meaning arises from an “existential communication” between the sensuous and the sensed, from a co-responsence between them, from a heterogeneity that is produced through this co-responsence of multiple touchings and multiple worlds. This is, for Nancy, following Heidegger^{xxvi}, the rhythm of appearing that

does not appear in itself but is rather the gap between, the “movement of coming and going of forms or presence in general...” This rhythm can provide for the communication across the senses as the movement of mimēsis and methexis. That is, philosophy, poetry, or saying, if we follow Heidegger’s formulations, can be privileged only in that metaphors can circulate between the senses, communicating “across the incommunicable itself”(1996, p. 24/46/47).^{xxvii}. Thus understood, poetry presents a chiasmus between intelligible sense and sensuous sense. We only sensually sense that to which we orient ourselves, and we only intelligibly understand that which is supported by perception (p. 28/54).

If the ‘Idea’ occurs in the gap, in the relation of reflection to the sensual and sensed world, then, I would like to suggest, it is the relation itself that is the feminine. If the feminine belongs together with the body, with matter and with otherness, with that which has been repressed to oblivion in this age, then the suspension of signification as touch itself is the suspension of a Euro-masculine imposition of sense. Hunt’s antipersonnel landmines are not mimetic in terms of merely copying land mines. They mime with a difference, and it is in this difference or differing that the relation appears. As Nancy reveals, the pleasure humans take in mimēsis is derived from the “troubling feeling that comes over them in the face of recognizable strangeness” (1996, pp. 69-70/121). It is the strangeness of recognizing otherness that is also a part of who we are, an intrinsic interiority that has been exteriorized. Since art is not merely the representational execution of cognitive reflection, it is far more a way of bringing the world into being. Hunt’s mines are strange, even monstrous, in that they show (montrer) “the strangeness of the world to the world” (1996, p. 70/122). Derrida suggests that it is this signing and designing, this extending and receiving of the hand that for Heidegger, distinguishes humans from animals. In

French, the words for to show, monstrer and montrer, make apparent the monstrosity of this uncanny, this unheimlich human ability to signify, to reveal, and to interpret the world.^{xxviii} In showing us how we perceive through setting at a distance, what is shown up is that humans are the ones who show. What is exposed is the monstrosity and the strangeness of what it means to be human, of our essential technical ability to transform the world.

Nancy points out that “images of the weapons of war” function not so much as the representation of tools of destruction but far more as the “affirmation of the sovereign right of the sovereign power to execute a sovereign destruction”, that is, to destroy the other (2000, pp. 121-2). Yet Hunt’s images ironically point elsewhere, against the accomplishment of this destruction; for their effect is far more than mere representation. Usually pink wool is knitted into baby clothes, into garments for the anticipated births of particular babies and not into images of the weapons of war. Moreover, the identities of particular babies only come into being through their contact with others, relations that shape their being as a being-with. What is juxtaposed in this work, then, is the modern articulation of *technē* as the finite “execution of being” in terms of the accomplishment of a sovereign state through the enactment of war, and the infinite presentation of being as relational that belongs to the *technē* of the artwork and to human relations. Hunt’s mines are hence strange in that they reveal the strangeness of the most familiar, the uncanniness (unhomeliness) of human know-how in its material manifestation^{xxix}, but it is not a manifestation that is shown up through accomplishment but rather through its very incompleteness. Her mines reveal the most familiar and unthought in order to call us to reflect upon the material manifestation of war, upon the ways that war touches us, rather than upon what it represents; the work reconnects the product with its production in order to help

us reflect upon the specific, singular deaths and maimings that these mines effect, deaths that can not be thought merely in terms of the annihilation of ontic beings, but rather in terms of the effects of war upon the web of human relations affected by the death of even one person. Without this reflection the effects are consolidated into the “figure of the Sovereign Leader or Nation where the community finds its finishing” (2000, p. 122), or the suffering is sublated to a cause or purpose (1997, p. 150).

Hunt’s exhibition, then, reveals this monstrous uncanniness of our technological nature exactly because it is not an aesthetic object, but rather a work that sets to work^{xxx}. As an artwork it has no other purpose than to exist, and it is not finite in that it will set to work when it is sensually encountered. Moreover, its effects, which cannot be controlled, will be multiple since they depend upon the relation among the senses encountering the work. And finally, her mines demand that we reflect upon “the alien in the sight of the familiar”^{xxx1}. The *technē* required for knitting is an embodied one with a genealogy, a cultural specificity, and a know-how and style that is passed down between generations by knitters who repeat these “banal and tiny motions over days over weeks over months” (Shapcott, 1988). Heidegger’s claim that *technē* as revealing is the “handiwork” of thinking could only emerge from a forgetting of a touch that preceded his, as well as of the hands that not only welcome and receive in the singular gesture of the handshake, but that also caress and cultivate^{xxxii}. As Derrida points out, Heidegger always “thinks the hand in the singular...as if man did not have two hands but, this monster, one single hand” (1987, p.182). Yet it takes two hands to knit. Indeed, Irigaray notes that knitting or doing needlework as she listened to patients “were topologically intelligent and subtle activities that preserved the freedom of both partners in the act”. As she explains,

knitting could break up the gestural mirroring that could confuse boundaries in the analytic situation^{xxxiii}.

Hence, knitting preserves difference. Antipersonnel mines, by contrast, destroy it; they are manufactured, produced for the finite purpose of blowing up bodies in the name of the Sovereign power of a Nation, for the purpose of the finishing, or accomplishing of a community (Nancy, 2000, p. 121). Antipersonnel mines are not designed to destroy particular bodies; they are in fact relatively indiscriminate about whom they maim or kill--children, women, civilians, soldiers. Hunt's mines, in their juxtaposition of pink wool and the deadly weapons they mimic, remind us of this strangeness, of this uncanniness of technology that can both cultivate and destroy.

Yet, when Nancy writes that it is “through technology that we are or become ‘human’” (1997, p. 128), he seems to be drawing upon the early Heidegger's intuition of *technē* as violent (*gewalttätig*); for Heidegger in the Introduction to Metaphysics, humans are the most uncanny exactly because they are violence-doing in that they “use violence against the overwhelming” in an attempt to tame it and to make sense of it. Humans are uncanny in that it is their essence to transform the world^{xxxiv}. Irigaray, in her critique of Heidegger's claim, explains that such an intuition of humans as technological and hence inherently violent perhaps arises out of a “masculine subjectivity which is unaware of itself” (2001, pp. 68-76). This oblivion entails a forgetting of our embodied sexual difference, and hence a forgetting that man is not everything, that he is not solely responsible for all that is created. Heidegger's description of *technē* as revealing, ultimately as a revealing through language is, for Irigaray, a safeguarding through memory that doubles life without creating it.^{xxxv} Nancy's claim that since art as technology has no “pre-established nature”, its

endlessness allows us to constantly redefine ourselves (1997, p. 128) is important. But in light of Irigaray's analysis, it could also be understood as a privileging of techné as that which defines being human. Irigaray would argue, however, that this privileging arises out of the forgetting of, and refusal to acknowledge, sexual difference.

Hunt's antipersonnel land mines, however, seem to reveal Irigaray's insight that, in not acknowledging the "irreducible difference of the other", man imposes his measure on "life that unfolds in itself but whose foundation he does not inhabit" (2001, p. 69). What results is an intolerance for that which is other, that reproduces and orders "itself without his governance". This violence does not have to be an "inherent part of the masculine to be", but, as Irigaray notes "that violence can come from an historical construction", that is, it emerges with the beginning of History where "man imposes himself as the master of nature" (pp. 70-71). This violence is then directed at that which appears in the horizon as that which evades it, that is in excess of it. In the production of antipersonnel land mines otherness is established but only in order to complete the one through the annihilation of the other. While antipersonnel mines are anti-knitting mines, Hunt's works invite a cultivation of our perception; rather than institute a sexual binary, they put the viewer who attends to them in touch with the feminine and with embodiment; they bring the attentive viewer to a corporeal awareness of the multiple possibilities of human relations, of caring and nurturing, and of blowing apart.

Antipersonnel landmines are effective because they are not perceived, because they fade into the background until the moment they are activated. Perhaps not surprisingly, Hunt's mines are also not perceived as such until, as artworks, they set to work bringing the viewer to see that she sees. Indeed, in the Gallery I observed many glance at Hunt's mines and then walk away clearly not open to a co-responsence

with them, or perhaps with the feminine that pink wool evokes; for those who dwell with them, however, Hunt's mines connect the obscuring of the feminine with that of the mines themselves, and present a paradox of caring-cultivation and destruction.

Art is significant for Nancy because, as a *technë*, it institutes meaning through a relay of connections between artisans and workshops, tools and artworks.^{xxxvi} In Heidegger's reading of the ancient Greeks, the telos of the artifact referred not to the end interpreted as aim or purpose, which is its modern translation, but rather to the work's bounding as a thing. This bounding does not mean that the thing comes to an end; rather the bounding sets the thing on its way, allowing it to presence.^{xxxvii} Hence for the ancients, there was no split between the product, its production and its effects. In modern technics, however, because the product has become an object, or perhaps more accurately a representation, the sensual relation has been broken off. Because there is no relation or rapport, there is also neither nearness nor farness (1996, p. 25/49-50).

Hunt's landmines call us to reflect on these different modes of production. For what is uncanny about antipersonnel mines is that they are produced by humans, but it is a production that seems eerily removed from the effects that it has. Just as in the 2003 war in Iraq, journalists reported on that which they heard about, but rarely witnessed, evoking a disconnection between image and word and a detachment from the effects of war, so too with antipersonnel mines, there is a distancing effect in their very mode of production; the production of mines is distanced in a general sense from its effects. Notably, the United States, which goes to war under the sovereign name of liberty and freedom, has still not signed the ban against antipersonnel land mines.^{xxxviii} Where, we might ask, are antipersonnel mines produced? What is the relationship between production and effects? And to what sovereign end are the mines produced?

The artwork, when it is not reduced to an aesthetic object, however, although also technological, exists only in the ways it connects directly to its effects.

Sense is produced by the art work through the multiple relations of self to self, self to world, and sense to sense. The space created by the multiplicity of techniques, of choices, of decisions that the artist must employ in making the artwork is the gap held open between artist and product, between *poiësis* and *technë*. This gap allows for an endless movement, a setting to work that establishes a multiplicity of worlds. Hunt's land mines accomplish this rhythmic communication revealing an infinite "space and delay between the producer and the produced, and thus between the producer and him- or herself". This endless movement of the artwork allows for an exteriorizing of the self through a distancing of the self; it provides for a way of experiencing and inscribing ourselves in the world in a way that allows for the distance necessary for proximity. The mines thus allow for a proximity or an intimacy between the viewer and the work because the art work, though finalized, always suspends the "presentation of its end" (Nancy 1996, pp. 25-26/ 49-50). In setting to work, it is not an aesthetic object, whereby the product is separated from its production. Rather, it sets to work and opens up a multiplicity of worlds that can be reflected upon. What counts then about the art work is that it exposes that there is no absolute origin nor end. For every singular origin there is a plurality of worlds created by a plurality of touches. That is, the origin is "necessarily plural, diffracted, discrete, a touch of color or tone, an agile turn of phrase or folded mass, a radiance, a scent, a song, or a suspended movement, exactly because it is the birth of a world (and not the construction of a system)" (Nancy, 2000, pp. 14-15). Hence each world is made up of multiple worlds.

In short, Nancy claims that modern technics underscores a loss of self induced by a series of splittings that cuts off relations. This claim, I would suggest, is not incommensurable with Irigaray's intuition that the oppositional binary structure of the one also impedes proximity as it cuts off any possibility of rapport between two. Yet, just as meaning does not adhere to the artwork itself but is rather produced in the relation, so too, for Nancy, can there be no sexual difference as such. On his account, this would require a given sexual identity that would precede the relation, whereas sexual difference is nothing other than the relation, the differing of sex as the spacing of intimacy (2001, p. 31). Rather than providing an account of a bounded sexed subject, he instead describes the subject as a singularity; a singularity is described in terms of its inherent being-with structure that also entails a differing within it. In this inherent being-with and self-differing structure, singularities cannot, according to Nancy, be equated with ontic being, which he seems to see as intrinsic in any understanding of sexual difference as such.

Yet his account of the sexual as rapport does not seem so far from Irigaray's own claim that sexual difference is relational rather than ontic, and hence that which is yet to be achieved (2002, p. 72). Moreover, while according to Nancy, the acknowledgement of sexual difference must be tied to a ground whether it be that of nature/being (phusis) or reason, Irigaray too calls such grounds into question. Indeed both thinkers, despite their indebtedness to Heidegger, dispute the "mystical effusion" of being as ground (1996, p. 36/65). For Irigaray this means that Saying as being allows only for the appearance of that which is intelligible according to the being of the same.^{xxxix} For Nancy, this means that the artwork does not reveal the world that is given in the sense of donation (es gibt). Since the arts are "first of all technical", art cannot be aligned with nature in its opposition to technē; art as technique "means

knowing how to go about producing what does not produce itself by itself” (1996, 24-25/48-49). Artworks are not, for him, revealed in the light of being that remains in obscurity but rather are themselves “the light that flashes (lux) and that causes to appear” (1996, p. 33/61). It is the very technical obviousness of the work that sets to work and establishes a world. The world is patent but not inherently meaningful; rather the artwork reveals that meaning is generated when we reflect upon that which is shown up in the gaps between what is sensually sensed and intelligible sense. If “art is always the art of not saying it, of exposing that which is not to be said” (Nancy 1997, 131), then art is that which exceeds the imposition of meaning. Both Nancy and Irigaray seem to agree, then, that what is called for is rapport between that which is not said and the intelligible. Neither seeks a definitive description either of art or of the feminine.

Still, even as Nancy and Irigaray seem to overlap in their approach to the relation, there is a difference. For Irigaray the “groundless ground” is woven “between those who are same and different” (2002, p. 72). For Nancy, the groundless ground is instituted through the mediation of technē. Indeed, technē is strange (bizarre) precisely because it belongs to humans as this instituting or grounding of something for which there is no ground (2000). He seems thus to privilege technē as that which allow humans to exteriorize the self in accomplishing the differing from self. Irigaray, alternatively, attributes the mediation directly to the relation between two who are different from one another. Even as Nancy refuses to acknowledge sexual difference as such, if we take Irigaray seriously, his account of the self seems more appropriate to the masculine as a fabricating and cultivating of himself outside of himself (2001, 76) At the conclusion of L’Intrus, Nancy writes:

The intrus is no other than me, my self; none other than man himself.

No other than the one, the same, always identical to itself and yet that is never done with altering itself. At the same time sharp and spent, stripped bare and over-equipped, intruding upon the world and upon itself: a disquieting upsurge of the strange, conatus of an infinite excrescence.^{x1}

Intrinsic to his philosophy of sense is a critique of any imposition of sense in terms of a prior access identifying and appropriating the other being (1997, p. 59). Reading Irigaray alongside Nancy alerts us to the danger that at the same time he runs the risk of such appropriation of the feminine in his use of the metaphors of “birth”, the “virgin”, and of course the “muses” without recognizing sexual difference itself^{xli}. For Irigaray’s concern is that the advocating of multiple differences without limit leads merely to another articulation of the one.

The ‘Idea’ then does not begin in reflection and then find its projection out onto the world. Rather, the Idea is there where “something of the world shows itself”. And for Nancy, as Kalliopi Nikolopoulou points out, this Idea, this stranger or figure, is feminine (l’Idée, l’étrangère, la figure) (1996, p. 79/132). She is one of the muses, one of the daughters of Memory (Mnemosyne) who provides inspiration or “movements of the spirit’ ...[who] animates, stirs up, excites, arouses” (1996, p. 1/11). And this material force, I want to suggest, is the maternal-feminine that is repressed, along with the corporeal, in our age^{xlii}. It is in the figures of the muses, Nikolopoulou suggests, that the feminine has a presence in Nancy’s work even as sexual difference is never overtly acknowledged. These feminine figures, she further argues, are there “in order to produce a regenerative aesthetic discourse”, even as Nancy resists the category of gender itself. (2003, p. 176). It would appear, then, that

the muses are the feminine that animate the movement, the rapport between, the communication that establishes groundless grounds. The muses as a singular plural provide for the possibility of multiple grounds, of sense as multiple.

There is an ethical dimension to this rethinking of a technics that is not controlled by saying, that is by making appear either through the transcendent and intentional figure of man, or through the donation of being. Since, for Nancy, it is rather existence or the patency of being that touches us, then what is called for is a technique that is in touch with the force of its materiality, a “technique as relation to endless ends”. This is what he calls “sense as ethos” which is not an articulated ethics as such but does have an ethical dimension which is our grounding in the material obviousness, the thereness of the world with which we interact by virtue of existing as sensuous beings (1996, p. 38/68-69). This material obviousness which is obscured to oblivion in this age is, I would suggest, the matter of the maternal-feminine, that is, it is that which belongs together with the forgetting of the feminine, of cultivation and of the relation itself. Irigaray claims that man has forgotten that he cannot create everything, that there is that which lies beyond his poetic realm, and thus his privileging of technē belongs to this forgetting. The challenge for us then is to reflect upon a technics that does not rely on instrumental ends such as sovereignty, as does, for example, the technics of war. For Nancy, the potential of technics lies in the acknowledgement of globalization as the end of the Sovereign. In his view we have reached this end, but since we do not yet recognize it there is “[w]ar everywhere and nowhere” (2000, p. 135)^{xliii}. Hence, Nancy calls us to think again about the significance of the singular plural for displacing the technics of war that seems to unite both the technological and the emotional, but does so through a radical opposition of sense and sensed, of product and production, of life and death.

Hunt fleshes out this claim further in her reminder of the singularity of each birth and of the caring cultivation required to bring that singularity into being. She calls us to think about the singular plural of the feminine and of embodied existence through her body of art which is itself a singular plural. If an artwork, for Nancy, is more “a style or a manner, a mode of resonance with other sensuous registers”(1996, p.36/65), perhaps we too can think of the feminine in such terms. The unity of the feminine as a singular plural could perhaps be found in the particular relations that set to work in the artwork. As the *technè* of Hunt’s exhibition reveals, what is at stake is not merely the establishing of worlds but rather that of particular and embodied relations that are an acknowledgement of the feminine as that which has been forgotten.

ⁱ Versions of this paper have been read at the Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture meeting in Halifax, 2003, at the Researching Women Conference held at the University of Western Ontario, 2004 and at Brock University, 2004. Thanks to Francine Wynn who discovered Barb Hunt’s exhibition and whose thoughts are woven into this paper, as well as to John Spencer whose feedback was indispensable. Acknowledgement is also due to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its support.

ⁱⁱ Nancy, The Muses, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 6; originally published as Les Muses (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 19. In further references the first page number refers to the English edition, the second to the French.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an extended and expert analysis of Nancy’s dialogue with the tradition of aesthetics, see Joanna Hodge, “Why Aesthetics Might be Several”, Angelaki 7.1 (2002): 53-67.

^{iv} Jean-Luc Nancy, L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel (Paris: Galilée, 2001), pp. 30-31.

^v Nancy, The Birth to Presence, trans. Brian Holmes and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 207.

^{vi} Anne O’Byrne, “The Politics of Intrusion”, The New Centennial Review 2.3 (2002): 178.

^{vii} Here in particular we could turn To be Two, trans. Monique M. Rhodes and Marco F. Cocito-Monoc (New York: Routledge, 2001); The Way of Love (London:

Continuum, 2002); and “How Many Eyes Have We”, Paragraph 25.3 (2002): 143-151.

^{viii} See:

http://www.ago.net/info/ago_exhibition_archive/exhibition_specific.cfm?ID=662.

^{ix} Giorgio Agamben, “Poiesis and Praxis”, in The Man Without Content, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

^x Jessica Bardley, “Barb Hunt: present tense contemporary project series no. 20” (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario Publication, 2001). The exhibition ran from October 24, 2001 to January 20, 2002.

^{xi} Luce Irigaray, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 7.

^{xii} Certainly Heidegger articulates such a distinction between craft and the creation that belongs to art in “The Origin of the Work of the Work of Art”, in Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Harper & Row, 1971): 58-60.

^{xiii} Bardley (2001) reports that “[w]omen and children below 15 years of age make up 30 to 40 percent of mine casualties, and in some countries they comprise the majority. More than 350 different kinds of antipersonnel mines have been produced by 50 countries. There are estimated to be over 60,000,000 land mines in Afghanistan alone. In the past five years, 17 countries spent around \$640,000,000 to help clear the world of land mines. It costs between \$3 and \$40 dollars to purchase an antipersonnel land mine. To remove a single land mine costs between \$300 and \$1,000.

^{xiv} Jo Shapcott, “Robert Watches Elizabeth Knitting”, in Electroplating the Baby (Bloodaxe Books, 1988).

^{xv} Indeed, to the extent that the various types of antipersonnel mines increases, Hunt’s project also remains open to expansion.

^{xvi} See Nancy, Being Singular Plural. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

^{xvii} Nancy is here referring to Martin Heidegger. See for example, Unterwegs zur Sprache (Tübingen: Neske, 1965); also published as On the Way to Language (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

^{xviii} See Hodge, (2002) for further discussion.

^{xix} Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 253-4; originally published as Phenomenologie de la perception (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), pp. 293-294. Hereafter the first page number refers to the English edition, the second to the French.

^{xx} Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 132. Originally published as Le Visible et l’invisible (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 174.

^{xxi} As Irigaray points out, color coding for children changes from culture to culture so there is nothing essential about linking pink to the feminine (“Flesh Colors”, in Sexes and Genealogies, Trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 157). Still, in western culture this connection surely contributes to a certain disdain for pink. For this reason it seems fitting that Code Pink was the name adopted by a group of women protesting the war against Iraq (<http://www.codepink4peace.org/index.shtml> [March 1, 2003]). Hunt certainly sees pink as being a far more radical color than black (personal correspondence, March 9, 2003).

^{xxii} Notably, Hunt has said that she would eventually like to see the mines displayed in a really large space on the floor (personal correspondence, March 9, 2003).

-
- ^{xxiii} Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Technique of the Present”, <http://www.usc.edu/dept/comp-lit/tympanum/4/nancy.html> (Jan. 30, 2004).
- ^{xxiv} See “The Sensation”, in Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception.
- ^{xxv} “An Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy”, in Michel Gaillot, Techno: an Artistic and Political Laboratory of the Present, trans. Warren Niesluchowski (Paris: Éditions Dis Voir, 1998), p. 95.
- ^{xxvi} See Heidegger, “On the Essence and Concept of Physis in Aristotle’s Physics B, I”, in Pathmarks, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); p. 208.
- ^{xxvii} Hodge refers to this as “transcendental touch” as opposed to “empirical touch” in Nancy (2002): 62.
- ^{xxviii} Derrida, “Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand, in John Sallis, ed. Deconstruction and Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 166.
- ^{xxix} Francine Wynn, “Reflecting on the ongoing aftermath of heart transplantation: Jean-Luc Nancy’s L’Intrus” (unpublished paper).
- ^{xxx} See Heidegger’s “Ursprung des Kunstwerks”
- ^{xxxi} Heidegger, “...Poetically Man Dwells...”, in Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 226.
- ^{xxxii} Heidegger, What is Called Thinking, J. Glenn Gray trans. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), pp. 16-17; originally published as Was Heisst Denken (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1961), p. 51.
- ^{xxxiii} See, “Gesture in Psychoanalysis”, in Sexes and Genealogies, p. 91.
- ^{xxxiv} Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 159-160.
- ^{xxxv} Irigaray, “From The Forgetting of Air to To Be Two, in Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington (eds.), Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 310.
- ^{xxxvi} Jean-Luc Nancy, The Sense of the World, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 138-9.
- ^{xxxvii} Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 8.
- ^{xxxviii} <http://www.icbl.org/> (July 18, 2003).
- ^{xxxix} See The Forgetting of Air of Air in Martin Heidegger, trans. Mary Beth Mader (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).
- ^{xl} Nancy, L’Intrus, trans. Susan Hanson, The New Centennial Review 2.3 (2002): 45.
- ^{xli} Kalliopi Nikolopoulou writes in reference to Nancy’s essay on Caravaggio in The Muses: “The liminal status of virginal sexuality best describes the aesthetic threshold as the simultaneous sense of joyful invitation and infinite withdrawal we feel when standing in front of an artwork. Like the feminine experience, or even the experience of death, the aesthetic experience is also one of self-division. ...One cannot speak of proper entrance into a space where the door, namely, the hymen, functions as an indeterminate sign of boundaries, a sign whose meaning exceeds and supplements the sign’s absence”. “L’Art et les gens’: Jean-Luc Nancy’s Genealogical Aesthetics”, College Literature 30.2 (2003), pp. 184-185.
- ^{xlii} It should also be noted as Heidegger does that Mnemosyne is feminine, as it is in its German translation as die Gedächtnis. Memory as the daughter of the sky and earth and the mother of the muses, play, music, dance and poetry, thinks about that which should be thought, that can be thought. It is the source of all poetry. Heidegger, What is Called Thinking?, p. 11; 7-8.

^{xliii} I am sympathetic to Krzysztof Ziarek's critique of Nancy's position on globalization. For Ziarek creation "remains implicated in the productionist momentum of power" identified by Heidegger as the movement of Gestell. See Ziarek, "Is All Technological?: Global Power and Aesthetic Forces", New Centennial Review 2.3 (2002): 139-168.