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## THE BOX-ASSEMBLAGE AND LUCE IRIGARAY'S ÉCRITURE FEMININE

ASAMBLAŻ I PISARSTWO KOBIEC (ÉCRITURE FEMININE) LUCE IRIGARAY

### Abstract

Taking its cue from Luce Irigaray's *écriture féminine*, and prompted by a desire to create an exclusive space where libidinal desires are freed from societal inhibitions, Idoia and myself, as model and artist respectively, set out to create a particular kind of artefact. This takes the form of a mixed-media, box-assemblage within which lies an indeterminate territory where the self encounters the other through an equitable relationship, unhindered by male-dominated knowledge. With an iconography imbued with liturgical as well as profane tropes, and drawing heavily on Irigaray's notion of the 'sensible transcendental', this structure exploits that which lies beyond female corporeality [Irigaray, 1993, p. 115, 129]. Its aesthetics, while encouraging disengagement from preconceived dogmas and the dissolution of sexual difference, enhances the experience of its deific symbolism. By correlating her body with the divine, the

### Abstrakt

Czerpiąc wskazówki z koncepcji pisarstwo kobiet (*écriture féminine*) Luce Irigaray i powodowani zamysłem stworzenia przestrzeni, gdzie libidinalne pragnienia są wolne od społecznych zachowań, ja i Idoia, jako artysta i modelka, rozpoczęliśmy prace nad szczególnym artefaktem. Przybiera on postać asamblażu, wewnątrz którego znajduje się nieokreślone terytorium, gdzie « ja » spotyka « Innego » w równoprawnej relacji, nieograniczonej wiedzą zdominowaną przez męski punkt widzenia. Posługując się ikonografią obfitującą w motywy ze świata sacrum i profanum oraz czerpiąc z koncepcji Irigaray 'sensible transcendental', konstrukcja ta wykorzystuje to, co leży poza kobiecą cielesnością [Irigaray, 1993, s. 115, 129]. Estetyka asamblażu zachęca do odejścia od z góry przyjętych opinii i pogłębienia doświadczenie boskiego symbolizmu. Poprzez skorelowanie jej ciała z boskością, asamblaż nadaje kobiecie trans – cielesną tożsamość.

box-assemblage gives this woman a transcorporeal identity.

Not unlike the enigmatic realm outlined in Irigaray's *La Mystérique*, the box-assemblage provides an ideal platform where Idoia expresses her uniqueness, primarily through high-definition simulacra produced from moulds taken directly off her skin; as for myself, my representation takes place primarily through the agency of her otherness [Irigaray, 1985, p. 191-202]. This kind of artefact grants us a space within which we not only re-assess concepts of alterity and selfhood, but challenge the dominant role of male subjectivity. Just as Irigaray's prose disrupts Jacques Derrida's phallogocentrism, the box-assemblage dismisses the traditional status of woman-as-commodity.

**Keywords:** artist, *écriture féminine*, Irigaray, model, otherness, subjectivity, sensible transcendental

Podobnie do nieokreślonej przestrzeni zarysowanej w *La Mystérique* Luce Irigaray, asamblaż zapewnia idealną platformę, gdzie Idoia wyraża swoją wyjątkowość, głównie poprzez wysokiej jakości symulakry, jakimi są odlewy jej własnego ciała; jeśli chodzi o mnie, jestem przedstawiany głównie w kontekście jej inności [Irigaray, 1985, s. 191-202]. Tego rodzaju artefakt daje nam przestrzeń, wewnątrz której nie tylko podchodzimy krytycznie do koncepcji odmienności i tożsamości, ale również kwestionujemy dominującą rolę męskiej subiektywności. Tak jak proza Irigaray zakłóca fallogocentryzm Derridy, tak asamblaż odrzuca tradycyjny status kobiety jako towaru czy własności mężczyzny.

**Słowa kluczowe:** artysta, *écriture féminine*, Irigaray, modelka, inność subiektywność, sensible transcendental

In my contribution to this collection of essays I demonstrate how Luce Irigaray's *écriture féminine* inspires and enables Idoia and myself to come together and actively collaborate on a project which, from conception to tangible product, is contingent on our mutual input. Taking the form of a series of box-assemblages, its realisation is also the result of a woman who, while in my studio and in my company, feels at ease with her physicality. It is the ambience where she asserts her right to what Irigaray refers to as *jouissance*; derived from the verb *jouir*, a term loaded with meaning. It may simply refer to a state of bliss; however, it may also mean to luxuriate without the dread of consequences, or to orgasm. This kind of artefact successfully challenges the traditional association of the artist's studio with the male genius and the correlate, yet divergent roles of male creator and female model. The usual narrative is that the creative subject must be a male virtuoso, the prime mover, while the one looked at is invariably a woman—the passive object, unquestioningly exploited as a source of inspiration and delectation.

At face value the box-assemblage may appear to be merely a three-dimensional device housing representations of our bodies and an assortment of other objects. However, with a design highly affected by *écriture féminine*, its production forms part of a continuing practice through which my association with the female model is constantly re-visioned, re-shaped, and metamorphosed. Importantly, as a hybrid artefact, it situates our fetishistically encased, and even enshrined, broken down bodies in a particular context—a frame of reference strictly identified with us as creators and subjects at one and the same time.

As a novel representational device, that is both complex and contradictory, the box-assemblage disrupts the traditional modes of portraying and perceiving the female body, and thereupon puts into crisis the bodies of its partakers. In various sorts of ways, it is not unlike the way in which Irigaray's écriture féminine unsettles our relationship, as readers, with that which is regularly but wrongly taken as fact, to the extent of disrupting our connection with language itself; essentially, with her mode of writing Irigaray confuses us as reading bodies.

Here I wish to recall Kenneth Clark's concept of the idealised representation of the female form, and his opinion that ensuing sensory pleasure from it should be regulated and balanced out with an adequate degree of contemplative pleasure [Clark, 1984, p. 3-29]. In contrast to this male-affected notion, the box-assemblage not only addresses the raw sexuality of a particular woman, through fragmentation it also disrupts the boundaries and integrality of her body, and fetishistically contaminates any pleasure which might be derived from residual ideality that the body-in-pieces harbours within it. Endorsing Irigaray's stance that woman is a manifold entity, the artefact liberates Idoia from the false assumption that she must be a unified, coherent and natural whole.

Self-reflexively, the box-assemblage walls up a fragment of the space where it is conceived and created, to effect a dedicated territory in which Idoia and myself may 'fuse' our bodies into one. Exceptionally different from a romanticised icon, Idoia's is an un-idealised representation juxtaposed with that of the male artist who, rather than being the invisible manipulator, readily shares his own exposure. This is the site where we pair our carnality, blur our corporeal boundaries.

Although too small to be physically experienced as architectural space, the microcosm within the box-assemblage holds inestimable significance as it is the place where the encounter with the other is recorded. Within this minuscule world is a progression of smaller intimate spaces in which the various representations and other items are compartmentalised in a ranking order, one that reflects their significance and value in terms of shared experiences and memories. *Tabernacle for Idoia*, 2011-unfinished, consists of a centrally placed cylindrical chamber concealed inside a cuboid shell. It may be accessed by first unlocking and swinging apart the two sides of the outer case, and then pushing aside a circular door. This is the artefact's penetralia, sheltering inside it polychrome simulacra of Idoia's vulva and right hand. The fan-shaped series of five recesses in the chamber's floor and the nooks flanking both sides of the round door, hold our belongings.

Of particular relevance to the box-assemblage is the 'sensible transcendental,' the notion with which Irigaray brilliantly bridges the chasm, equivocated by the patriarchal order, between transcendence and sensibility, or more specifically, that between mind/spirit and body [Irigaray, 1993, p. 115&129]. With this the philosopher commends women, dismissively associated with matter and nature by their male counterparts, to corporeally seek a self-defined female subjectivity that brings forth its own symbolic expression in language. Acknowledging its underlying potential, Margaret Whitford audaciously suggests that Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental' means the 'flesh made

word’—a reversal of St John’s famous reference to the supernatural transformation of a linguistically structured male god into carnal substantiality. Here Whitford affirms Irigaray’s conviction that raw flesh is the originator of all knowledge and linguistic constructs drawn out from it. By her rhetorical use of female genitalia and other female body parts, such as in *When our lips speak together*, Irigaray not only defies master texts of philosophy, but transforms her writing into a meta-narrative that defiantly dissociates itself from the linguistic structure of the pater [Irigaray, 1985, p. 205-218; Whitford, 1991, p. 48].

The sensible transcendental motivates Idoia and myself to create the box-assemblage as a means of establishing our own association between the carnal and the divine; we both seek that which lies beyond our carnal selves. We make this happen by taking on board Irigaray’s counsel that in an interpersonal relationship, each one’s threshold of accomplishment should not be mutual subjugation but the divine, that which in *Way of Love* she describes as:

*(...) the becoming of the human itself which, through love, transubstantiates body and spirit. And, with them, the spaces where they dwell, that they build* [Irigaray, 2002, p. 11].

Promoting the sensible transcendental on the basis of a lack of a female gendered deity, Irigaray reinterprets divinity as the complete realisation of oneself and the establishment of perfect harmony with others [Irigaray, 1993a, p. 61-3]. As for ourselves, this is akin to how much we nurture and cherish our liaison in the intimacy of the studio where our bodies and senses are supreme, our differences and idiosyncrasies critical. It mirrors Irigaray’s assertion that

*(t)he unity of the relation between two subjects is a creation, a work of the two elaborated starting from the attraction, the desire which pushes the one toward the other without the relation being then already conceived as a “with the other”* [Irigaray, 2002, p. 78].

Actualised in the course of our sessions, the near perfect affinity between us brings about what Catherine Clément refers to as mystical syncope, spells of ‘pure’ harmony and pleasure which dismiss inhibitions and fear of the unknown, moments when we are perceptibly ready to give access to each other’s interiority [Clément, 1994, p. 200-16]. This induced awareness of our carnal and existential selves makes us perceptive to our respective otherness, that mysterious element capable of getting around our rational intentions to stir our feelings to the core. Here we push ourselves into the realm of Irigarayan mysticism. Such alterity impinges not only on Idoia’s subjectivity whose bare body triggers the libido between us, but also my own. As for Idoia, when seductively sprawled on the studio bed or divan, with legs open and ready to be smeared with creamy stuff that finds its way into her labia and skin crevices, she makes clear her disposition to open up her subjectivity to me. At such moments her state is not un-similar to that of the transcended person cryptically described in *Speculum of the Other Woman*:

*Woman is neither open nor closed. She is indefinite, in-finite, form is never complete in her. She is not infinite but neither is she a unit(y), such as letter, number, figure in a series, proper noun, unique object (in a) world of the senses, simple ideality in an intelligible whole, entity of a foundation, etc. This incompleteness in her form, her morphology, allows her continually to become something else, though this is not to say that she is ever univocally nothing. No metaphor completes her. Never is she this, then that, this and that.... But she is becoming that expansion that she neither is nor will be at any moment as definable universe [Irigaray, 1985, p. 229].*

With tact, Irigaray's disrupts what Jacques Derrida ironically coins phallogocentrism by devising a new vocabulary, one that privileges woman's versatile and independent nature, rather than the phallus. This kind of terminology may be used to describe Idoia herself whose complexity as a human being, and more so as a woman, fills me with awe and wonder to the extent that I do believe that there is more than just human nature sustaining the allure she plays on me. On the one hand this has led me to delve deep into myself in search of that which triggers my feelings for her; on the other hand, since it is this woman's physical presence that enkindles my passions, I am sure that the cause of such a fascination must either be utilising the agency of her corporeality to impact me, or else it is Idoia herself who uses the 'power' embodied within her in ways that affect me so deeply.

As the materialisation of a re-visioning process directed at our relationship and the libidinal desires underpinning it, the box-assemblage acts both as a metaphor of ourselves and an exploration of our sexuality. In many ways it is also a physical extension of ourselves, an intimate world that pragmatically sustains our rendezvous. Whereas in contexts that are extramural to it as a structure, Idoia's perception of me is an experience of myself from without and thus beyond my comprehension, through its prosthetic attributes and its power to hold and assimilate her subjectivity, the box-assemblage materialises my access to this woman's insight of me.

On an idealised plane, our wish is to get closer to each other in a manner that circumvents sexual consummation to go beyond it. The box-assemblage is not only amenable to the sanctuarization of our corporeal simulacra and relics, but also to attending to our collective subjectivities. Designed expressly around our bodies, its becoming grows into a means of disengaging us from our own worldly concerns and commitments that might hinder our assimilation.

This disengagement is particularly triggered when we form moulds directly off our flesh; our sensitive bodies react to the alien, yet surprisingly pleasurable sensations afforded by the substances employed. Body casting makes us acutely alert of our whole throbbing bodies, primarily those areas that are the focus of our attentions. With these moulds we form high-precision simulacra of our carnal selves which, once given their skin tones, are lovingly placed inside the structure.

Out of these, Idoia's vulva is of particular relevance to the box-assemblage's makeup; its presence is in direct reference to Irigaray's *When our lips speak together*, whereby she employs the labia metaphor to challenge self-centred male subjectivity [Irigaray, 1980;

Martin 2000, p. 152]. For her the duality of the ‘two lips’ not only represents a fluid and tolerant subjectivity but also symbolises communication between a male-dominated existence and the realm of the other, or that which stands for both the feminine and the divine. This equivalency is based on the intersection between philosophy, theology, and writings of mediaeval women mystics such as Angela of Foligno (1248-1309) [Joy, 2006, p. 17; Barker, 2010, p. 322]. In the enigmatic realm of their mysticism and through their profound love for the divine, these women were capable of affinity and intimacy with God, so strong as to suggest a metamorphosis of themselves into Him. In *La Mystérique* Irigaray describes a conceptually and contextually analogous realm:

*...the place where consciousness is no longer master, where, to its extreme confusion, it sinks into a dark night that is also fire and flames. This is the place where ‘she’—and in some case he, if he follows ‘her’ lead—speaks about the dazzling glare which comes from the source of light that has been logically repressed, about ‘subject’ and ‘Other’ flowing out into an embrace of fire that mingles one term into another, about contempt for form as such, about mistrust for understanding as an obstacle along the path of jouissance and mistrust for the dry desolation of reason [Irigaray, 1985, p. 191].*

Several years before coining ‘sensible transcendental,’ Irigaray was already putting forward the idea of an exceptional association between woman and God, thereby not only suggesting that the former could acquire her subjective identity through the latter, but also that their figurations may become interchangeable. All along Irigaray asserts that the incarnate woman holds the source of immaculate knowledge, capable of transcending the limitations of dogmatic reasoning. This kind of insight assures a state of pure bliss, fulfilment and belonging—a mystical state of being which is sympathetic to the carnal body. It is this kind of exquisite knowledge, forthcoming from Idoia herself, that sustains the box-assemblage from concept to tangible presence; she permeates it with an aura of transcendence, the kind that Irigaray claims to be unconditionally her own as a woman.

Fathoming the radical significance of women mystics’ writings, Irigaray affirms that the feminine and the divine belong to an indeterminate space that is beyond the outer limit of reason. Woman and God share a conceptual space placed at an antipodal position relative to that which is considered rational and masculine. In her writings, Irigaray exploits the very fact that the otherness of God is a keystone of Christian theology and thinking and speaking about this alterity is a Christian’s interminable pursuit [Irigaray, 1985, p. 191-202]. Thanks to Idoia’s demeanour and earnestness, this same kind of space is materialised within the box-assemblage.

The necessity of ubiety and skin contact for the coming-into-being of the plaster simulacra vouches for the material existence of our flesh. They not only disrupt suggestions that our bodies might be evanescent existences, but confirm the substantial beingness of our bodies. Although lacking the suppleness of actual flesh, the body-casts not only embody its sensuality and eroticism but, as a result of their solidified material state, perpetuate our bodily experience. As for our physical rendezvous, this may be

experienced through the material totality of the artefact. Thus, as a display the box-assembly not only arouses the sexual curiosity of the partakers, but affords them visual and tactile sensations. Although these are synonymous and anticipatory to the sexual act, this is perpetually deferred.

As a consequence of the bodies' fetishisation, as a result of being fragmented and compartmentalised, and also through their correlation with devotional objects, their impact on the partakers is even more forceful. This was witnessed last April when a series of these artefacts was presented to the general public at Spazju Kreattiv, Malta's Arts Centre<sup>1</sup>; visitors were encouraged to physically engage with the exhibits through touching and handling. Throughout the twenty-one days or 114 hours it was on display, the number of visitors exceeded the 4,700 mark. Most empathised very well with the artefact; Cécile from France commented:

*Stunning exhibition! I really appreciate the possibility of handling the works, which desacralises them, and makes us feel voyeurs, 'undressing' the work of art to disclose what is intimate....*

Juliane from Switzerland self-reflexively noted that:

*(I) never felt as beautiful (for a long time) thanks for the variety of vulvas, shrines and women. The sacred feminine alongside the male....*

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* Luce Irigaray addresses the link between the female body and space. She observes that although woman as mother is capable of giving man a sense of place, man simply '...envelopes her with walls while enveloping himself and his things with her flesh' and consequentially exploits the spatiality of her body for his own ends [Irigaray, 1993, p. 11]. The box-assembly, as a world-in-a-box, symbolically restores to woman that place which, although naturally her own, has time and again been appropriated by man. The artefact renews Idoia's relationship with those qualities that Irigaray considers as unique to womanhood—the spatial and the foetal. She reciprocates by imbuing it with her carnality and transcendence, or rather her 'true-otherness.' Just like *(a) home needs to be appropriate to the one who dwells in it—it is the place of preservation of one's own intimacy(,)* the box-assembly turns out to be the ideal home to ourselves [Irigaray, 2002, p. 158].

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.kreattivita.org/en/event/sacred-l-profane/>

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