Extreme Makeover; or, How the F-word Shaped Contemporary Architecture

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Figure 1. Pinkman2, VNS Matrix (1993)

Not so very long ago, it felt cool to be a feminist in architecture. This is not to say that feminism ruled the day, but rather that feminism was one of an acceptable, if not downright desirable, panoply of architectural critique. Following structuralist discourse, and along with the burgeoning field of queer studies, feminism was asking very difficult questions of architecture: questions that challenged the power arrangements implicit in the profession, the masculinity of an overwhelmingly male practice, even the qualities of spaces in buildings and the separations and gazes these spaces enforced.

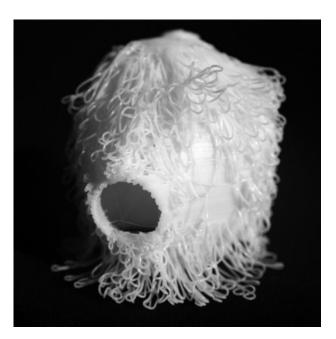


Figure 2. Andrew Atwood, Project I (2010)

And, to architecture's credit, these challenges were mostly welcomed, engaged with an utmost seriousness, at almost every level of the discipline and profession. It wasn't ever an easy road, but it was one that understood that change was necessary. The alarming percentage report brought to us courtesy of Leslie Kanes Weisman in 1994 that indicated that women only made up 8% of the profession spurred active recruitment efforts in architectural education and a great deal of equity progress by professional organizations.¹ At the university level, there were conscientious searches for women architects as fulltime faculty. We need only look around the room here to see that while the numbers aren't yet 50/50 – they have at least improved.

But, really where feminism felt cool (and not just correct) (for awhile at least) was in academic discourse. Before getting to that however, it is important to relate a brief run-down of what is meant here by "feminism."

Starting perhaps at the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century suffrage movement, there exists a feminism that has been characterized as "first wave." The first wave is predicated on the astounding, even shocking, idea that women are equal to men – that women should be afforded the same rights, the same privileges, the same pay for the same labor and all else that has been included in that still-unratified Equal Rights Amendment. The "first wave" includes reproductive rights, health rights and global issues of gender oppression, and is still very much alive and pressing today even if the word "wave" sounds like something that recedes.

In architecture, the "first wave" of feminism resulted in many of the strides that have been made towards gender equity, as well as that continuing fight, in the profession, in the practice and in the education of architects. The "first wave" includes what may be termed as "visibility projects" – the recovery of the role of women in the historical, social and cultural record that had otherwise been glossed over or missing. The idea behind visibility projects, such as the many dissertations in recent years on history's invisible women architects is basically that exposure to the entirety of the historical record inures people to the fact of a continued and sustained presence.² Through visibility comes an acceptance to the past, and hopefully, an empowerment to the future.

Lurking between and among the **first wave** is the idea that an architectural field that has been dominated by men may also be dominated by a masculinist sensibility – that, in addition to the blind spots of the historical record, equity also means that the 98% of the built environment that has been designed by men has also been designed unfairly – consciously or not. The "first wave" includes the social politics of gender division, and in many cases, the spatial ramifications of these divisions and the potential role for female architects in correcting or resolving this geography. In essence, this is the aim of the Weisman book on the

"man-made environment." It is also at the heart of texts such as the Dolores Hayden's groundbreaking "What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like?",³ and the very straightforward text by Ellen Berkeley, <u>Ar-chitecture: A Place for Women.</u>⁴ While urgent in tone (necessarily), and quick to data citation, these texts also speculate on the possibility of a different form of built environment that would emerge if women were indeed at least half of the design talent. This is an interesting speculation, but it is difficult to assess or prove an aesthetic sensibility, much less binary differentiation, and so only forms a very small part of this research.

My main interest rides in with the "second wave" of the 1980s and '90s. This wave emerges not from gender struggles but from a philosophical understanding of human subjectivity. As subjects, and yes, the "second wave" generally accepts Freud, gender (women versus men) is a projected layer performed by the superego. It is not the heart of the matter. Instead, "second wave" feminism embraces a more post-structuralist discourse to suggest that subject formation itself is key to uncovering or unlocking the paradoxes of power relations that often find themselves expressed towards, and as, gender difference. As such, the "second wave" is not as concerned with the woman/man equity problem as it is with the baggage and boundaries associated with the maintenance of a woman/man difference. "Second wave" feminism sees gender as one of many possible expressions of sexuality and sex, and predicates the entirety of its ontologies on difference itself. In the words of Elizabeth Grosz, there are "a thousand tiny sexes," - it's where these are manifested and when and by what mechanisms and operations these occur that is the main question for this discourse.

The "second wave" is thus very Foucauldian. Identity, and especially gender identity, is enforced, regularized and by no stretch of the imagination, spatialized. The "second wave" has therefore been received into the academic discourse of architecture – most notably in the edited volumes, <u>Sexuality and Space</u> edited by Beatriz Colomina (1992) and the conference proceedings titled <u>The Sex of</u> <u>Architecture</u>, edited by Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Kanes Weisman (1996). And, it has done so, mainly through the aegis of a purported spatialized Other – which through its very existence behaves as the necessary supplement to architecture's own spatial behaviors. The main idea, following Mary McLeod, Catherine Ingraham, Ann Bergren and a large fistful more, was that architecture could be critiqued more effectively, not as an overtly patriarchal enterprise, but as a complicit enforcer of power relations, and especially those that reinforced masculinist sensibilities, even if the architect was a woman. The "dominant paradigms" existed only because the unconscious conditions existed in language, in ontology, in the discipline itself. The supplementary status of nature, of emotion, of desire, of irregularity came under the scrutiny of the "second wave" critique. And, with a more post-structuralist extant (the Deconstructivist show was in 1988), the idea that architecture had hegemonically repressed sex and sexuality was not all that far-fetched.

So, as I said before, not so very long ago, it felt pretty cool to be feminist in architecture. To be a feminist, necessarily implied that you could occupy the vaunted position of postwar criticality initiated by Roland Barthes: you could be a critical outsider AND you could be a practicing insider, a subverter, a super-vocal subverter! - enjoying the pleasure that vocality had at that moment. Even better, you had at your fingertips a critical establishment already post-Derrida, and therefore all ready to entangle themselves in the intricacy of this discourse, made up of the coolest, most avant-gardist guys (Peter Eisenman, Sanford Kwinter, Mark Wigley, Mark Jarzombek, K.Michael Hays, Jeffrey Kipnis) replete with the swankiest, semi-underground, awesomely-fonted publications (Assemblage, ANY, Pamphlet and Zone) positively itching to engage in some interdisciplinary knock-downs. (Aside: and yes, I believe that in second-wave feminism, anyone can be a feminist). Colomina becomes an academic darling, McLeod and Ockman get their own program at Columbia, Iowa rises..., and before long, that is to say, throughout the 1990s, it becomes increasingly difficult to disengage architecture from sex.

Now, I am not at leisure here to recount every step along the way, but suffice to say, by the end of the century, the feminist fervor in architecture had indeed quieted. Certainly, no one will claim that feminism achieved its goals in architecture. The numbers are still paltry when we speak of gender equity, and only thanks to the determined, sustained and focused work of professional associations and scholarship bodies, this project does and should continue. It is, however, in this academic discourse that one can hear the silence. From 1994 to 2000, there were at the very least 25-30 titled books and anthologies on sex and gender, not including the "queer space" movement that accounts for another exponent of that number. After 2000, unfortunately, despite the utter coolness of the feminist moment in academia, the critical project of feminism in architecture dissolved.

Many critical projects dissolved. Some point to the rise of PC-ism, especially after 9/11. Others cite the urgency of oppressions in other venues. I could not begin to speculate on the *cause*.

But, ... I do know this version: By 2004, the only surviving essay on feminism and architecture is a delicate account by Pat Morton in the otherwise morose and mostly historical anthology, <u>The Feminism</u> <u>and Visual Culture Reader</u>. In this post-mortem piece, tellingly titled, "The Social and the Poetic: Feminist Practices in Architecture, 1970-2000," Ms. Morton describes feminism in architecture as either "social" or "poetic," which I would read as firstwave and second-wave. Her conclusion is striking however: that perhaps feminism in architecture *needed* the masculine, because the "masculine" was "inside."⁵ Or, simply put, the masculine remains as the <u>architecture</u> part of the equation.

In other words, and I want to emphasize that Ms. Morton was merely a messenger, one of the reasons espoused as to why or how the feminist movement in architecture died by the end of the century is that while it was engaging and thoughtful and well, somewhat important, it did not produce any significant or notable architecture. In Morton's formulation, by rejecting the masculine, the feminists also rejected "architecture". With the exception of a few pieces (i.e., not buildings) such as the virtualized Women-House (a redux of the 1972 WomanHouse) or the rather striking installations, TranSite and SoftCell by Diller+Scofidio, the end result was that the ultimate material of architecture had not been served by the sturm und drang of feminist theory and critique. No matter how much the wall was implicated or the line or the closet or the kitchen, at the end of the '90s, it didn't seem to produce any convincing architecture. It was not, as they say now, generative.

I also know this: Architecturally speaking, and well, historically accurate, we are living in a different

century. Not many of us could imagine the kinds of formal experiments that have overtaken our field, nor that we would be placed in the position of imagining the pedagogy appropriate to them. Exuberant, exquisitely-rendered, non-Cartesian forms are everywhere. And, it is widely believed and understood, even by those who may have been the innovators, the envelope pushers, that, unless one is super-attentive or super-proactive, the forms are intended to resist criticality.

In 2002, in the Wexner show, Mood River, a display of not-much architecture but a lot of toothbrushes and taillights, Jeffrey Kipnis gave us fair warning when he argued against criticality, against meaning, and instead preferred to describe these fluid forms (often designed via the computer) as "indexical effects." "Most indexical effects are incidental," he claims, equating form, color and luminosity to aesthetic pleasure, mood and atmosphere. From this, he completes the triad by referencing Stephen J. Gould's notion of "exaptation" also as indexical, "at the heart of the diversifying power of evolutionary processes." 6 And, so, there we are set with a powerful mixture: seductive bio-forms, an evolutionary impetus towards the technologically-enabled different and new, and a strong pleasure principle. Goodbye, grumpy old architectural critics and theorists. Your project is dead.

There is a television show called "Extreme Makeover". The premise of the show is that a good, but tragedy-stricken, family is living in a bad house. With the help of the show's producers, a core group of cute handymen and women, and a few neighbors, the house is made-over from top to bottom. Maybe a room is added, a new porch, a splashy kitchen - it is all very shiny, clean, tasteless and new. And, it's meant to touch your heart. Everyone is crying and hugging and so happy that the good family now has a good house.

But, the reality is that it's still the same house. It's been massively renovated, and it may have jumped a bit in terms of real estate value, but it can't and doesn't fix a marriage or eliminate the leukemia for the sweet little girl. The house is intended to heal. By extension, this means that the pain or dysfunction must still exist, and so, the new house is especially informed (and deformed) by each potential site of pain. The wheelchair-bound mom gets a ramp. The young military couple get a lovely master bedroom. Leukemia Girl opens her eyes to a happy new playroom. To move forward, they celebrate exactly what was painful before.

And so, if we can accept the analogy, this is my claim: contemporary architecture is second-wave feminism's extreme makeover.

Admittedly, second-wave feminism might just fall under the larger umbrella of post-structuralism, and to assert that post-structuralism informed contemporary architecture is hardly news. It would also be foolish therefore to suggest that the overlaps and influences between feminism and poststructuralism could be exactly parsed. The entire idea of post-structuralism is predicated on a fundamental complexity (?) that cannot be parsed, that has no "nature". And, frankly, there's too much resistance to authorial authority in the textual record to pin down any form of division or split at the time of the 1990's discourse.

Instead, I want to offer what may be understood as "reasonable clues" that it was feminism that shaped contemporary architecture, that it is the house in which contemporary architecture dwells (or to trace it back further, the makeover itself began with the normative definition of feminine beauty). What follows is a run-down of, what is to me, a few of the more theoretical underpinnings for this claim. I will show some work but not much, as I do not want to focus on a design sensibility, as I think the male/female distinction is a bit of dead end here. This research is in the earliest stages, and wish to welcome any input from this body.

#1: THE BODY (SEDUCTIVE BIO-FORMS)

In first-wave feminism, the body is self-possessed – it is the corporeal existence of another gender – and it is on this body that various violences are inflicted: rape, female circumcision, foot-binding, corsets, high heels, and so on. In second-wave feminism, the body is a site. Building on the work of Julia Kristeva (whose work on the body predated Deleuze), the body is a materiality of signification, a zone between the semiotic (or realm of the abject) and the chasm of the (pre-oedipal) psyche. Through bodily drives, the issue for Kristevan body-theory is one of representation. The body itself is anti-essential.

A not-much later formulation is that envisioned by

Donna Haraway in the "Cyborg Manifesto." Aimed mostly at "utopian" social feminism (the first wave), Haraway unabashedly uses Deleuze to create an entire world predicated on a political-fictional machine-creature. The cyborg, as a body, has an inessential "existence," or to quote Haraway, "People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence."⁷ For her, there are matrices of domination that characterize each age, and that the disruption of subject identity, as the cyborg embodies, is necessary. In a particularly prescient chart, she outlines old and new dominations:

Representation Bourgeois novel, realism Organism Depth, integrity Heat Biology as clinical practice Japour Mind Second World War White Capitalist Patriarchy

Besides recognizing that column #2 could perhaps describe the elective list at most architectural schools today, and again, while I could speculate on a set of "transitionary" architectural experiments from 2000 to say, 2008, the exact and particular translation of Haraway into architecture can be attributed directly to Anthony Vidler's "Homes for Cyborgs" chapter in The Architectural Uncanny. This essay begins and ends with Haraway, with exact quotes on the cyborg and its (non)body - and from this Vidler spins two distinct architectural trajectories: one that equates cyborg theory to the Surrealists and their implicit critique of Le Corbusian functionalism (ala Koolhaas in Delirious New York); another that sees the irreconcilable body of the cyborg in the domestic spaces invoked by Diller + Scofidio's Capp Street project, the withDrawing Room (1987). Vidler argues in an analogic way on behalf of the irreconcilable, the inessential, moving easily between the cyborg body and the body of the built work. He refers to Diller + Scofidio's transitional architecture using the words of William Gibson, "a deliberately unsupervised playground for technology itself"8, and he celebrates this, revels in its liberating potential. He describes the dislocations of signifiers (the chair) and the fluidity of the geometry (the catwalk) as, "this network is [sic] in a real sense the cyborgian construction."9

Jump ahead to 2001, and Vidler's <u>Warped Space</u>, he offers this very useful explanatory bridge that brings us to this moment: "Architects, ... have selfconsciously put the notion of the Cartesian subject at risk, with spatial morphings and warpings that, while seemingly based on avant-garde precedents from the twenties, necessarily construe space in post-psychoanalytical, postdigital ways. The most celebrated example of this wave of warpings is, of course, Gehry's Bilbao museum But a range of other experiments, including.... The inhuman yet animistic blobs, skins and nets of Greg Lynn, all contribute to a sense of a new kind of spatial order emerging in architecture, one that ... demands an

Simulation Science fiction, postmodernism Biotic Component Surface, boundary Noise Biology as inscription Robotics Artificial Intelligence Star Wars Informatics of Domination

extension of reference and interpretation with regard to its digital production and reproduction."¹⁰

I don't mean to say that feminism was imported solely by Vidler here, but he is a crucial cartographer for a more global route towards a feminist sensibility. The cyborg body liberates us from the hegemonies of functionalism towards a techne of fluid geometries. A new spatial order follows. An architecture of inessential bodies – both technological and biological - a dream deferred, now fulfilled.

#2: TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION

If the body could be imagined as a site for techne, a techne unto itself, over a stable identity, and thus disrupting the stability of all ontology, and if, as in Vidler (although he was by no means the only one), architecture is also a potential site of ontological collapse, but that both suffer from a representation problem – then, it is not a far leap to imagine that the unfettered playground of the technological, otherwise known as software, could be an apotheosis. Indeed, if one traces the history of the computer to its own origins in the work of, say, Alan Turing, the proposition of the machine was not merely as an aid, but as an oracle, achieving an "intelligence" that could not be met by human effort except through the long-term possibility of evolution. Far more than being able to handle mass guantities of data, the computer has been imagined from the start as an "intuitive" device, unbounded by the exigencies of human consciousness and language. One continuing goal of programmers that has seemed obvious from the beginning but very difficult in practice is the approximation of randomness, which if one can leap from one theoretical arena to another is thought to produce quantum phenomena in much the same way that an Irigarayan or Deleuzian "singularity" is produced. Leaping again (and in a "jumping universe" as Charles Jencks intones from chaos theory, this is ok), it is amazingly easy to imagine therefore that the computer is the "difference engine" that had been forecasted by Deleuze in 1969, and embraced throughout the 1990s.

A "difference engine" would not be a machine primarily – hardware is figured only as a singular concretization in Deleuze. A difference engine would operate between concretizations, slipping, becoming - it would generate, but it would not be. This philosophical intermediary is typically traced from Leibniz to Deleuze, monads to nomads. But, the slippery other, the generative one, is also figured into Luce Irigaray's 1962 dissertation, The Speculum of the Other Woman, as she is "jamming the machinery of theory" posits "the feminine must be deciphered as inter-dict: within the signs or between them, between the realized meanings, between the lines." In a latter chapter, she makes this guite explicitly architectural when she refers to in Platos Cave, "a small wall, a wall-ette, ... that separates and divides without any possibility of access from the other side... teikhion ... rendered as thin, light, wholly unrelated to the massive walls around a city,...a wall that Plato compares to a curtain."11 And, for an architectural discourse that was wholeheartedly critical of its "First Machine Age" and its inauguaration in the 1930 "Machine Art" exposition at MoMA, and its machine a'habiter, the turn towards the machinic, with its implicit offers of an identity-annihilating randomness, the exact opposite of the modernist dogma, was inevitable.

There is a period in the late 1990's through which it is possible to trace the relief that software enabled. The initial forays into difference-as-difference, seen in the 1997 <u>A.D</u>.s, "Folding in Architecture" and "Architecture After Geometry," are rather literal squiggles and folds, hoping at best to emulate the Baroque reviso offered by Deleuze in <u>Le Pli</u> (which is partially reprinted in one). By 1999, through the work of Stan Allen and Peter Eisenman, the diagram emerged as a potential formal generator of difference, with Allen using the "field" to challenge the hegemony of the "object," and Eisenman referring (more Freudianly) to a latency of form that lurked in all human design efforts. The diagram would speed up the progression towards the next evolutionary jump and thus reveal what could not be known. The diagram is still active today – but it has been largely replaced by animate software, and most recently, by parametrics.

At this point, I believe that I am merely scratching the surface – I haven't satisfied the itch. The manifestation of the computer software is also the endgame in a long-standing discourse on the Author and Authority in the world of architectural design. Whether seen as the violence of the mark, or the seeming coherence of the object (and the supposition that it had an Author), it's very difficult to consider the turn towards the unintelligible non-object writing-form without moving from Barthes to Foucault to Judith Butler whose 1993 <u>Gender Trouble</u> outwardly suggests an anti-rhetoric against "disciplinary regimes" by disrupting "frameworks of intelligibility."¹²

Similarly, it's difficult to not acknowledge, at least in passing, the rise of architecture's previously minor literatures in contemporary architecture, now welcomed through the very fact of their difference: landscape, interiors, decoration, ornament, *color* (remember Wigley's book on Whiteness?). Feminist discourse on architecture – both first and second wave – had long accused mainstream architecture of a blindness towards these other fields. And, now, they're super-cool, super-graphic, exuberant, delightful.

Delight itself is delightful. Venustas never felt so good before. In 1992, film theorist Laura Mulvey described domesticity as the container of emotion – a necessary architectural regulator on what could not be abided in the construction of a human public.¹³ Now, emotional rescue, mood river.

#3: PLEASURE PRINCIPLES

In addition to the depths I am plumbing here from textual reference, I recognize that I should walk the contemporary line, and skip the interpretation, skip the wall text (so to speak), and revel emotionally in the effects of the work. So, when I say "shaped contemporary architecture," I do mean shape – as in the shapely, the feminine curve, the sensuality of it, poised against and with the Freudian spectre of an unknowable, leaking, furry feminine.

<A series of 30+ slides here set to music and sound from first-wave feminism to second-wave to contemporary architectural investigations, as shown at the beginning of this paper, identified but presented as highly sensual visual material>

Yes, these are visual reminders – again, only reasonable clues offered here today; but they reinforce my point. Contemporary architecture - the stuff of blobs and fur and irregular geometries and innovation, experimentation, form-finding, fantasy figure fooferall - has for the last ten years or more posed as if it were a post-critical avant garde. An entirely New Thing. And, I suppose that because it had no windows or doors or much else that was recognizable, we believed that line. It certainly developed and continues to develop a discourse about its profound newness, and about it's turning away from criticality, that it is anti-, or milder, post-criticality, and by extension, proclaimed the necessary death of all else that came before. I contend that thou doest protest too much - I know the mother from whence you sprang and you are her spitting image.

The idea of the "makeover" is itself a female construct, or should I say a female gendered reactive to the phallogocentrist concept that the body is an insufficient sexual attractor. Through increased prosthetic (and highly-technologized) devices – face paint, hair extensions, bigger boobs – the makeover is marketed as a form of wish fulfillment. Goodbye, frowsy, frizzy and unwashed. Hello, new me.

First-wave feminism would reject the makeover in favor perhaps of a do-over, and so, was never associated with the (patriarchally-laden term) beautiful. Second-wave feminism on the other hand (and here Naomi Wolf comes to mind as a bridge character who never was really accepted by either wave), embraced the idea of the beautiful makeover because it was such an overt Freudian symptom. Pointing to the drag queen and the stunning Priscilla Queen of the Desert, an over-the-top makeover, a beyond-beyond, was empowerment in the form of subject identity dislocation and fluid sexuality, beauty as grotesque. *Do* make over, the message implied, just do it extremely.

In Spring 2002, I attended a conference at UCLA, organized by Sylvia Lavin, titled "The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful." The organizing principle was not merely to revel in the supposed beauty of the new forms (although Greg Lynn's paper was titled, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and the Love the (Ford) Taurus"), but a call to architecture to rid itself of 1990s criticality. Ms Lavin argued on behalf of producing a discourse that would intentionally do away with the "distinctions between evidence and speculation" to "harness extreme rhetorical form," to suspend "academic rigor – sustained argumentation and historical research" in favor of "a cocktail-party mood." This was an incredibly brave, incredibly audacious suggestion for her as a historian by training and Chair of the department, but she was adamant that these "extreme measures" were necessary for architectural discourse to become contemporary.

Extreme indeed.

ENDNOTES

Leslie Kanes Weisman, Discrimination
by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made
Environment (University of Illinois Press, 1994):3.
See Alice Friedman, Women and the Making
of the Modern House (Yale UP, 2007) for an advanced
discussion of the effect women have had on architectural
design decisions without themselves being architects.

3 Dolores Hayden, "What Would a Non-Sexist City Be Like? Speculations on Housing, Urban Design and Human Work," <u>Signs</u> vol.5 no.3 (Spring 1980)

4 Ellen Perry Berkeley (with Mathilda McQuaid), Architecture: A Place for Women (Smithsonian, 1989) 5 Patricia Morton, "The Social and the Poetic:

Feminist Practices in Architecture, 1970-2000," in Amelia Jones, ed., The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader (Routledge, 2003):281

6 Jeffrey Kipnis, "On Those Who Step In the Same River..." from Mood River (Wexner Center for the Arts, 2002):37

7 Donna Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century". *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge: 1991): 33

8 Anthony Vidler, <u>The Architectural Uncanny:</u> <u>Essays in the Modern Unhomely</u> (MIT, 1994): 162 9 Ibid.: 160

9 Ibid.: 160
10 Anthony Vidler, <u>Warped Space: Art</u>,

Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture (MIT, 2001): 10

11 Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, Gillian Gill, trans., (Cornell UP, 1985): 248.

12 Judith Butler, <u>Gender Trouble: Feminism and</u>

the Subversion of Identity (Routledge, 1990) 13 Laura Mulvey, "Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity," in B. Colomina, ed., <u>Sexuality and</u> <u>Space</u> (Princeton UP, 1992)