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SATISFIED: FEMINISM AND THE AFFECTIVE TURN IN ARCHITECTURE *A 10 MINUTE PRESENTATION*

Words by *Andrea Wheeler*

GOOD MORNING.

My name is Andrea Gibson—it's my married name. I am an Assistant Professor at a large University in the Midwest where I teach Sustainable Architecture and am a design studio instructor. My presentation today, is entitled: 'About architecture and affect, and experiencing feminism in architecture now'. Or perhaps it could be called, 'Satisfied?' And you may quickly see that I am not. To outline this talk, and due warning, I will be discussing feminism, philosophies of affect and architecture. You may be wondering how indeed she will describe feminism at this time, in the United States and in the institution. And how, affect? To respond to you curious few, for me, feminism – though this seems barely possible now - is work towards equality—a rediscovery. But I believe this sort of equality belongs to a different place and different logic. And it requires artistic and poetic work. Feminist affect? Well, I think this is simply about how you feel now; it is the prompt, the push forward. That this is not about how you think you feel. For those of you who are ambivalent to all such questions, male and female, my more direct appeal is to your belief in your freedom in the current heart of American affect. I am a little nervous about the position I take and I understand that this may be controversial to some in light of what has happened to us or what has been done to us. I am not American – as you might hear from my accent – and I am in the midst of provocation. America is great, they say, and those who don't like it can go home. And so, here, now, in this large auditorium, at this time, (which is late for the Iowan early riser) I want to ask - acknowledging the peculiarity of this question and its strange appeal to your feeling - what is feminism and what is feminism, today? How is it felt? What is its mood? These are certainly difficult questions. You may answer that mood sits in

indefinable spaces, vague and misty, dim and dusky, to be purged by scientific-method. But I will continue: How has its feeling been conceptualized and how must it be conceptualized? What is our mood doing now, felt through our bodies, in our intimate places? And what will it be in the sites of our conversation? Affect is dirty. It cannot be sanitized. And it does not need feminism to illuminate it. But we cannot be ashamed or ashamed to feel. Mood may not be welcome, but while we are now being built on feeling, let us usher our mood in for examination. Let us direct the strangeness of a feminist light on it. Let us feel and let us imagine—without hesitation or aversion to speculation—a future. Let us hypothesize with an emotive voice, the spaces of hostility we have created—between us and between man and woman.

I said I would discuss some architecture, but it is not only the exclusion that I want to address, but also the energy, the mood, the somatic resonances of the felt-body that incite action and agreement, which are my feminist concern. So firstly, and lovingly, to begin my exploration I want to share with you, in this affective performance, an intimate memory.

I am in Boston for the first time, the only time, in fact, and in my wanderings—mental and physical—I imagine a woman, my age, perhaps a little younger, who feels estranged from the place. I see her in the dress of her era—belonging not here, but to a different place of her beginning. She has an innocence and she tells me about the landscape, which she knows is not this one, and about both the sameness and strange difference of this new world. She shares with me her feeling of being new in this new world, this new garden. The creator's work can be seen at work, she feels. It is like a different day in his making, with a different manner in his hand. Birds, animals, insects, trees, plants; the wide feet, the big beaks, their bright colors, their fat bodies. All

the same species and yet so very different; similar but so strangely different and very new. She sees it in the joy of a sharp new light. Truly, this is a new world, and I sense it too. I feel her curiosity as I breathe in new air with her. I spend some time encouraging her, for want of company, seeing with her the difference between her beloved coastline and this place: its landscape, its plants, and its animals. But she seems not to see the architecture, the buildings that I saw. Maybe it was only in her time we felt, perhaps.

So I have set the scene, theatre staged, and my intention, in part, is duly described. I have framed a picture with a strange feeling of a relationship created in time, welcomed. This unusual voice, with her feelings, her small energy was allowed to grow. And through her feelings, a different perspective began to form in me. Her voice could have been coming from the outside, from history, somehow encapsulated in the material of the place and released for me. I was open to believe it was not my imagination. I was open to dismiss all academic theory that told me to suppress her otherworldly presence.

I wanted her to tell me of her experience and illuminate my own vision. So I remained quite open to quite another sort of analysis of her. Maybe this was real, true. But my intention here is to describe what could be a becoming. And of course this suggests my feminist intention.

My waking dream occupied a part of my experience of Boston. But she—I did not give her a name and she did not offer me one—did not accompany me home. Perhaps I mistook the place of her origin as English, and her time, and I misinterpreted her perception. But this little imagination intrigued me and continues to do so. My work up until this time was with research method and I had arrived in Boston to talk about work with children, designing with children, participation with, or even ‘witnessing-with’, as I have heard it

described, children.

The questions at the time were about a right to be consulted. What was an ethical relationship in this context; do ethics, that is to say the most radical and most ethical of ethics, include an ethics towards the other who is different as a boy or a girl. Do ethics, including participation ethics and teaching ethics, include a proper ethics towards the bodies and differences in ways of relating? Reflecting on this work now, questions arise about an ethical attitude the development of sexual expression and the truth of moody expression, complaints.

So to bring the conversation back to affect, and to this place I find myself occupying, this lecture theatre, at this time in what will soon be history, how can we protect ourselves from the collective ill-recognitions of adult humanity and how it is affecting us? What is our adult feeling in response? Can we, through a critical perspective on the now, in some acknowledgment of our current feelings, and some sense of the uncultivated the depths of our passions as women, incite a new feeling and a new sense of who we are, together? I love my continued discovery in America; it feeds curious desires. But there is another discovery to be made; this is about how we respond to current conditions when we know we all participate in the living of others. This could be architecture; it could be how we make things. It starts with how we feel space and how we can occupy space together. It takes the innocent perspective of the world to allow us to return to an ethics towards the environment and to other human beings, and to find the value of a shared insight with those we consider others to recognize what is missing from our humanity. Only then, perhaps, can architecture become the cultural form with which we can share our insight—that which gives us feeling.