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Banging Your Head against a Curved Wall

DRAG lab

Crit norms exist not as mere guidelines but as performative acts that define subjectivities and perpetuate power imbalances. In our pursuit of transformation through writing and performing, we strive to dismantle those power dynamics. This text results from a performative writing workshop held in April 2021. The words of the characters, the characters themselves, and the places described are extrapolated from memories of our personal experiences as architecture students. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred. We are thankful to all the professors and members of our architectural communities who granted us thoughtful material and a boundless source of imaginative indignation.

*“Queer, c'est torsion, c'est twist. ... La torsion est la signature; il s'agit de produire des entorses, de ne pas aller en ligne droite.”*¹

Characters

Students: **Lilith Buller, Wendy Mottig**, standing in front of their drawings, Wendy is dressed in her usual black, Lilith in gray (or white, on a special day). Wendy is wearing a single designer earring.

Professor and assistant: **Chantal Spatial-3000**, open shirt, shiny gold neck chain. **Lola Flaque**, bent over in her chair.

Guests: **Fritz Brickett**, closed shirt, shiny egghead, always sits with his legs open. **Frei Georges Maximiliano Didelianitz**, red Santiag boots, mustache, and black turtleneck with round glasses, sits on the far edge of the chair.

Lilith, Wendy, and Lola, in unison, facing the audience: All of the oppressed know this power and have had to deal with it in architectural practice, and in academic communities. It is the one which says: you do not have the right to speech because your discourse is not scientific and not theoretical, you are on the wrong level of analysis, your site is badly chosen, you are confusing discourse and reality, your plans are naive, you have misunderstood the precedent.

If the discourse of architecture exerts a power upon us, it is because it works with concepts that closely touch us. In spite of the historic advent of the intersectional, queer movements, whose interventions have already upset the philosophical and political categories of the discourses of architecture, their categories

DRAG lab is a group of people studying, teaching or working at École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) who promote parity and diversity in the architecture school through readings and discussions.

Note The original text was written by DRAG lab members Marion Fonjallaz, Julien Lafontaine Carboni, Morgane Hofstetter, Flavio Gorgone, Yamina Sam, and Myriam Treiber. The English translation and prelude are by Fonjallaz, Lafontaine Carboni, and Hofstetter.

¹ “Queer is torsion, it's twist. ... Twisting is the signature; it's about producing twists, not going in a straight line.” Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies*, Collection Lignes Fictives (Paris: Galilée, 2010), 144–45.

² These two paragraphs are based on the words of Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 21–32, here 26–27. In French: Monique Wittig, "La pensée straight," *Questions féministes*, 7 (February 1980), 45–53, here 49.

(thus brutally put into question) are nevertheless utilized without examination in the crit.²

Chantal: Hello, everyone, we have the honor of having with us today Frei Georges Maximiliano Didelianitz and Fritz Brickett from the bureau Brickett and Brickett, although he is not here yet. *Chantal looks around, observes Lola, pauses.* Oh, and also Lola Flaque, EPFL teaching assistant. I'm Chantal Spatial-3000 from the TABLE agency, as you all know. [To the students:] You can start.

Frei, intervening before *Lilith* and *Wendy* can speak: First, I'd like to introduce myself a little better ...

Chantal: Yes, of course. Sorry, Frei.

Frei, sitting back in his chair, speaking with large hand movements: As you know, I am an architect, Cooper Union. I was a researcher at Paris X in the history of architecture, working on Mies's flushing systems as a paradigm of the modern habitat. Thanks to this thesis, I won a lot of prizes, a Lafarge, a Holcim, a Lafarge Holcim, and also a Saint-Gobain. [Chantal nods her head, looking at *Lilith* and *Wendy*, to show how honored they should feel to have him as a jury member.] You can find this thesis expressed in my various books, such as *Towards a Radical Plumbing*, *All about Plumbing*, or *Learning from Pipes*. I also edited a small journal called *Neufert and Conflicts of Interest*.

Chantal, opening her arms: Thank you, Frei. You may start, my darlings.

Frei, whispering to *Chantal*: It's nonsense. No, but did you see this model, it doesn't work ...

Lilith: In fact, this model is above all a reference to Duchamp's ready-mades...

Frei, cutting *Lilith* off: Yes, indeed.

Wendy: The model can be activated by the body. ... We asked ourselves what place feminized bodies could take in architecture. Because you should know that Marcel Duchamp sometimes took a female pseudonym to sign his works, like an alter ego. We found it interesting to place ourselves in this genealogy ...

[Time passes]

... This conception of gender, besides presupposing a causal relationship between sex, gender, and the way of producing, creating architecture, implies that architecture reflects or translates gender, and that gender reflects or translates architecture.³ So that's how this semester we tried to get our heads out of the curved wall and to trouble the gender of architecture.

[Fritz enters the room, talking loudly on his phone, taking his time, and sitting across from the students, next to Frei.]

³ This paragraph is based on Judith Butler, *Trouble dans le genre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), 92–93. "Cette conception du genre, outre qu'elle presuppose un rapport causal entre le sexe, le genre et le désir, implique que le désir reflète ou traduit le genre, et que le genre reflète ou traduit le désir." In English: "This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire." Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999), 30. Wendy tends to prefer the French edition.

Chantal, delighted: Hello, Fritz! How are you? Please sit down. Maybe you can tell us what you think of the project, your first impression?

Fritz, looking at the drawings: Well, personally, I would never have put these references together.

Lilith, embarrassed, moves back as close to the wall and as far away from Fritz as possible. She hesitates before speaking: We used this reference to emphasize the duality of the character and his way of performing gender in a constructed space.

Chantal stands up to touch the model and tries to convince Fritz: If I may, there is also something super interactive where you can come and modulate the model. You can come and put your own spin on it; it's part of the process, it's important ...

Frei: It's essential, yes.

Lilith: Actually, I'd like to comment on this, because in reality this reference was used critically, so it's not what we meant at all ...

Fritz, cutting Lilith off: Yeah, I hear what you're saying, the curves, et cetera. But a project should be able to speak for itself. I'm supposed to understand it just like that, without explanations.

[Silence.]

Chantal, softly: You should also talk a little about the pipes ... [Louder:] No, because we have a specialist in pipe design, theory, and speculation. So there you go: it's very important. [Tapping on the model to test its solidity.] It's well built. You see, Frei? Fritz, do you like it? [Frei gets up to turn the model upside down.] Ah well, here we have something. This is your project! I didn't see your project before Frei's gesture. Thanks!

Frei: Yes, and now we're really getting into feminine architecture, that's clear.

Lilith, eyes wide open, losing patience: What I meant to say was that ... [The professors exchange glances before staring at Lilith.] we came to the conclusion, with the help of Judith Butler, that gender is performative, that it constitutes the identity that it is supposed to be, so gender is always a doing but not the doing of a subject that precedes this doing, and therefore, according to our research, it seems ridiculous to us to want to define a project as feminine, or to say that there is a difference in essence between a project made by a man or a woman, as when we talk about curves, for example. I don't know if I was clear ...

[Long silence, the members of the jury look at each other in a circumspect way.]

Fritz, slumped on his chair, legs wide open, his computer on his belly: I find this story of curves very pretty. It suits you ladies; it makes sense. But for me the question is, have you thought

about the budget your intervention would imply? At least a little? We can't afford, as architects, to just have fun drawing curves. Sure, they come naturally to you, but there's a whole lot of work behind it, which you should be prepared for.

Frei, *excited by the turn of the discussion*: If they had drawn the pipes, they would have seen it right away.

Fritz: Yes, it starts with that kind of detail. [Frei nods, *displeased to be talking about details in piping, which he sees as a real metaphysics of materialist dialectics.*] Last week, typically, we were on my construction site—a gigantic construction site, I won't even tell you. So here we are, we started with the dimensioning of the pipes. That's something that's missing and that I don't see here, so I can't get into your project.

Chantal: That's right. We want to get into questions of construction. Here, we are very much in the representation. We have to feel the project; we have to feel the spatiality. And the pipes help enormously in this matter.

Lilith: To come back to the reference to Le Corbusier, in fact we wanted to talk about Eileen Gray's house, not necessarily about the intervention he made in this house, by reappropriating it without consent, because ...

Frei, *cutting Lilith off*: Yeah, well, I think you're being very polemical.

Chantal, *trying to catch up*: Maybe we shouldn't talk about consent here. I mean, this is an architecture school. I would like to talk about the female curves that you have represented very well, my darlings. In fact, curves are the anti-standardization. Personally, in my mandates, I never do social housing, for example, because everything is standard. And, in fact, when it's standard, it's cheap. So, I really don't do social housing, and this is also a political statement; it's saying: I make curves because it's difficult to build. Construction—we'll come back to this later because there are some gaps—I like it when it's difficult to build, because it's antisocial in a way, and I like that a lot. Le Corbusier would say that you have liberalized architecture.

Lola, *whispering to Chantal*: The pool, you have to elaborate on the pool.

Chantal: I'd like to talk about the pool. I like it a lot. [Pointing to the Venus de Milo statue by the pool.] Especially the statue. Now there's a representation of femininity that goes well with the curves of the pool. I like it because it says: This is what you should aspire to in order to achieve a real feminine architecture. And that's really important in today's society.

Lilith: In fact, just to come back to our diploma project, we wanted to criticize this binarism of architecture in our statement, and ...

Chantal, *cutting Lilith off*: Why a critique?

Lilith: A critique of the differentiation between female and male architecture, in a binary way, and that's ...

Frei, *cutting Lilith off*: The quality of these categories is obvious, and you just proved it.

Fritz, *looking up from his computer after five minutes out of the discussion*: Here I am. In fact, when I look at your project, it's typically these kinds of elements that I miss. [He turns his computer toward the students and shows one of his projects under construction.] You can see the reinforcement of a concrete slab. You know what I mean; we understand each other. For me, this is architecture, and this is what I need to feel in your project to be able to understand it and project myself in it. And there, all these images, I don't see myself in them at all.

Chantal, *showing the project on the computer*: Yes, that's exactly it. The question of the angle of the interstice. That's really what architecture is about; it's that tension.

Frei: Unclothed and sensitive architecture in the end. It is the cabaret of fragility.

Fritz: A beautiful collaboration.

Chantal: Radical.

Fritz: Curves are indeed to be handled with care. It's a skill that is considered feminine, but you have to be careful with the implementation. There are projects with curves that I think are sensational and structurally sound, but you have to choose those references carefully. [Turning his computer and showing a plan of Nicolas Ledoux's *Maison des Plaisirs*.] Here we have a magnificent example that shows that curves are in fact masculine if they are well handled and constructed. There are very few cases where it works, so it's a very delicate subject that you are touching here, ladies.

Chantal: Indeed, curves are masculine when they are well handled—it is important to specify that—and also when they are tubular. Do you want to tell us about the interior?

Wendy: Yes, so, postmodernism was a liberation of the modern movement through the use of color. There was a focus on working with flash colors, reminiscent of a queer aesthetic.

Chantal, *cutting to Wendy*: Is that why you use *cuir*? ⁴

Wendy, embarrassed: Um ...

Chantal, getting angry: Isn't that what you said? Did you say *cuir*?

Lilith: So, no. Queer means ...

Chantal, *cutting Lilith off*: Colored *cuir*! It's feminine! So it fits with your subject perfectly, right?

Frei: I wouldn't go so far as to say it's kitsch or queer. [Frei

⁴ In French, *cuir* means "leather" and is pronounced similarly to *queer*.

insists on a strange pronunciation of queer.] I would say it's a re-interpretation of Loos's work, from within. It's pretty clear. The work on the views, the deep perspectives, the use of color.

Fritz: At the same time, ladies, we can see right away that you are a little more at ease, that it is clearer when you talk to us about interiors, color, furniture. There I see perhaps a track to be followed that would suit you more than these stories of structures that seem to escape you rather quickly. [*Lilith and Wendy don't know how to react anymore.*] At the same time, you chose these colors, so I'm having trouble understanding your decisions.

Wendy: There are many architects who have worked with palettes, like Le Corbusier, and we tried to make our own palette for our project with colors based on our references and our feelings.

Lilith: We wanted to use other references than those presented to us during our studies. We needed to open up to more women, nonbinary people, or people we haven't heard much about, or architects who work differently, like collectives.

Frei, puzzled: Well, I think there were still a lot of women in your history of theory courses ... like ... and especially CIAM as a collective.

Chantal: I want to ask why, in fact? No, but because the colors are cute, you can say that. The *cuir*—I'm not sure; but ok, let's move on. I consider myself a feminist.

Frei, crying out: We're all feminists in this room! [*Lilith and Wendy, leaning against the wall with their arms crossed, look at each other, disconcerted.*]

Chantal: No, but all that is to say that we feel they are feminine colors, and that you should bring your feminist proposal precisely to the interior of the house. Precisely with these colors. So yes, I like it! After all, the structure—we won't really come back to it, because I'm worried ... [*Chantal gets up to touch the model and ends up breaking it.*] Yeah, that's it!

Lilith, softly: In fact, this was rather intended as a criticism of domesticity, of domestic work, done by women, unpaid ...

Frei, outraged: Well, you're still playing the game of capitalism. I mean, here we are again in a scheme where you want to separate the working classes, like in Ireland. So they fight each other instead of fighting against the capitalists.

Chantal: That completely escaped me. Maybe you could elaborate?

Lilith: As I said, it's a critique of always representing women in the domestic space, doing housework, unpaid and unconsidered reproductive work ...

Frei, interrupting Lilith: This question of the woman stuck

with the domestic work – it's a fight that we already won forty years ago! These struggles, we saw them. We were very engaged.

Lilith: This conception of gender, besides presupposing a causal relationship between sex, gender, and how architecture is created implies that architecture reflects gender and that gender translates architecture. Gender is not a name, nor is it a set of floating attributes; the effect is produced by the force of the practices regulating it. Said differently, gender turns out to be performative; it constitutes the identity it is supposed to be. It is ridiculous to want to define a project as being feminine because it was thought up by one or several women.

Fritz, searching on his computer: I think I just understood your project. I have a great reference for you. [He shows a perspective of a project by Zaha Hadid Architects, the Rublyovo-Arkhangelskoye district in Moscow.] You see, in this project Zaha showed that you could mix men and women in the curve and that it brought a real complementarity. Here we can see that a woman can master the curves by adding the necessary masculinity. It's a bit like Ledoux, you understand?



