

Significant Differences

An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz

By the Editors of Interstitial Journal

Elizabeth Grosz is a feminist scholar at Duke University. A former director of Monash University in Melbourne's Institute of Critical and Cultural Studies, Grosz's research interests include feminism, art, architecture, corporeality, sexual politics, gender studies, comparative literature, and modern philosophy. Her numerous books include *Volatile Bodies*, *The Nick of Time*, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, and *Becoming Undone*.

You're often recognized as a feminist materialist, yet materialism, itself, is a hotly contested theoretical frame, and one whose traditional parameters are being challenged by new philosophical trajectories, like speculative realism. How has materialism informed your political and ontological commitments? Moreover, why do you think new feminist materialism has been so heavily utilized in thinking through twenty-first century social problems, even beyond feminist research or women's studies?

Materialism is an ontology, one that is often set up in opposition to the ontology of idealism. I would not call myself a materialist at all because of how strongly this opposition has figured in the history of Western thought in framing what materialism is, whether it is understood in terms of atomism, of physicalism, or in terms of dialectics. I am interested in an understanding of the real or the universe that does not reduce what is there to matter, but is capable of conceptualizing the nuances and layers of ideality that matter carries within itself. For me, this ontology is a politics (and an ethics) to the extent that this is the open ground on which we exist and forms the horizon of possibility for all our actions. It does not give us a politics (or an ethics) in itself, but it does orient us toward political and ethical action.

Do you think that 'new feminist materialism' has been so heavily used in thinking about social problems? This would surprise me. I would not accord it quite this power. There is a convergence of interest on the part of a number of feminist theorists that has returned to the question of materiality that was so powerful with the rise of Marxism and its reliance on historical materialism in the 1960s and 1970s. But with the demise of that project that so interested many feminists, the so-called 'new materialism' that has been published in a few anthologies recently looks like a revitalization of materialism. Almost everyone—especially in the natural sciences—is committed to some sort of materialism. The more interesting question is: What kind of materialism? I am not at all sure that the

'new feminist materialisms' share a common concept of materiality. Certainly there is not a close fit between speculative realism and feminist materialism. This is in part because speculative realism doesn't address itself to the questions of power and resistance that are so central to feminist (and other politically oriented forms of) materialisms, but also because speculative realism, and its cognates, including object-oriented philosophy, situate themselves so clearly in the tradition of a post-Kantian epistemology that denies any specificity to the corporeal form of the knowing subject.

Much of your work has focused on the construction of corporeality, both politically and in philosophical discourse. To what extent does the body continue to be conceived in masculine and heteronormative terms, and how does your work recognize corporeality as co-constituted with race, class, gender, and other social signifiers?

I don't think bodies are co-constituted with race, class, and gender. I think bodies are constituted by all sorts of forces and are classified in terms of many different categories—not only the usual relations of oppression, but also relations of, say, height, weight, eye color, or any other categories human bodies share in common. Race, class, gender, and sexuality are ways that we classify real, or phenotypic, differences between bodies that are biologically real. Pretty obviously, since there has not been a major upheaval in how we understand bodies, whether medically, sociologically, philosophically, or politically, they are still conceptualized with masculine, homophobic, racist, classist, and other terms. Maybe you are asking: If I have spent so much time on the masculinity and femininity of bodies, why haven't I spent so much time addressing the racial, class, and other features of bodies? I think that I have always attempted to think these together. But I have also attempted to understand the very real differences between different types of categories of oppression and I have argued that sexual difference is what makes possible and accompanies all other social differences. This is true to the extent that every human is the product of two parents, whether real or reduced to their gametes.

You've also interrogated the rigid boundedness of spatial conversations and constructions, arguing that architectural theory frequently disregards minoritarian particularities and temporality. Why, in your view, does space require a consideration of time and what insights does the coupling of space with time give us about how marginalized bodies experience and inhabit built environments?

Space, in itself, doesn't require a consideration of time; it depends on what one wants to accomplish in addressing space. Those working in the field of spatial studies—designers, architects, urban planners, geographers—have done perfectly well without addressing temporality in their various explorations of spatial conditions and spatial constructions. When one undertakes a numerical or geometrical exploration of space, one loses the qualities of continuity. But in separating space from time, they have ignored some of the qualities of space that are linked to its engagement with the forces of temporality—the idea, for example, that every specific space, and perhaps space in general, has a history,

has undergone changes, is inhabited by events that transform it. I don't know how this affects how 'marginalized bodies' experience their environment. This is not one of the questions that particularly interests me. This is really a sociological question. We are capable of adding a complexity to our understandings of space in such a way that it doesn't particularly address subjectivity at all. Nonetheless, if we want, not just a practical relation to space, but also a theoretical understanding of it, we need to think the interrelations (and separateness) of space and time. I am not sure if this has any direct political consequences.

It is interesting to hear you speak of conceptualizing space without addressing subjectivity, since the one has often been problematized with the other. How might we go about creating non-subjective spatial theories and what might such understandings look like?

Well, it is not really subjectivity that needs to be absent, but concepts of the subject as an identity of a particular or even multiple kind. The question, "How do marginalized subjects experience space?" is not nearly as interesting as the question, "In what ways may space be conceptualized, or even experienced, differently?" a question that does not assume that we know what it means to be a woman or a man, black or white, working class or middle class, or how each experiences spaces or anything in particular. To think space, we need to think its qualities and its capacity for quantities. This need not involve thinking identity at all. But we cannot move beyond space as it is experienced or might be experienced—that is what it is to us.

Critical thought often relates political concepts, like identity construction, to discourse and ideology. Are discursive and ideological critiques enough to catalyze social transformation or do we need new theoretical gestures to understand the complexities of modern political life?

I am not happy with the current opposition between representation and reality that affirms the real only at the expense of representation. Representation *is* real, after all. The materiality of the real must have a dimension of ideality for there to be language at all. Language and the real are not linked in terms of language's (or ideology's) construction of the real, but perhaps we have moved too rapidly away from the converse claim, that reality constructs or at least makes possible the very existence of language, that language is virtual in the real.

You've made extensive use of evolutionary theory and Darwinism in your work. How has evolutionary theory influenced your thinking about becoming and difference. Furthermore, how does difference structure not only human subjectivity, but relations between all material objects, including nonhuman entities?

I haven't worked on Darwinism, but only really on Darwin himself, who I have claimed is better, more complex and interesting, than the vast majority of "Darwinists." I was

interested in questions of difference and becoming long before I reread Darwin's works. I was surprised at how contemporary many of his claims are—he produces a theory of species, for example, with no concept of norm or ideal. The more of his work I read, the more it became clear that this work provides, without question, a theory of the becoming of life, and of the human, from earlier forms of life, a becoming made possible only by reproduction, and primarily by sexual reproduction. Darwin has devised a theory of species as vast series of differences within forms of resemblance and is, thus, the first and most significant theorist of difference as the engine of becoming. Difference is the 'principle of identity' for all identities to the extent that no entity is self-producing or self-identical, with each entity and relation a product of the encounter of differences of different things and different orders. If difference is what emerges through all forms of life, then difference must also suffuse the inorganic conditions that enable the eruption of life from non-life.

Finally, in pursuing anti-essentialist, non-teleological, and evolutionary ideas of the emergence of life and transformation of materiality, how have you come to understand of the event and, in turn, ontologies underlying the existence and significance of sexual differentiation?

This is another complex question. Are you asking about how evolutionary theory might help us to think the advent and existence of sexual difference? If that is the question, then I think that it is very helpful in enabling us to think the evolution of sexual difference, an empirical question related to many contingencies and accidents, a form of selection of the fittest techniques for guaranteeing variation within species and, thus, also the evolution of species. In short, Darwin can help to explain the emergence of sexual difference at some point between the evolution of single-celled organisms into simple and gradually sexually differentiated animals and plants. But he is not interested in and can't help us with understanding sexual difference as an ontology and as a crucial ingredient in society, whether animal or human. This is a project that is more feminist than his work is; this may be why Irigaray, in conjunction with Darwin, may help us to address some of these issues. For her, sexual difference is an ontological and social, as well as natural, force that has been covered over and obscured through the operations of patriarchy in all its variations. The two sexes do not exist within patriarchy, although they do exist in nature. Instead, patriarchy has reduced the two to one, the singular self-same subject, and its negation or other—woman, but also other races, other sexual orientations, other classes are reduced in this process to less than men, and, thus, to less than human.

Patriarchy cannot tolerate the acknowledgement of two different kinds of bodies, places and perspectives, so it reduces all others to failed men, men that lack the key characteristics of maleness. In this, it is not self-subsistent, but functions within and alongside of relations of economic production and systems of racism, homophobia, and ethnocentrism, which themselves are not self-subsistent. But sexual difference functions

differently than all the other forms of social oppression and discrimination; it is the condition by which all other bodily differences are produced because it regulates the operations of reproduction and always accompanies all other socially significant differences (these would count merely as forms of species variation in Darwin's terms). This was Darwin's insight, that sexual selection generates great variations in bodily form. Social oppressions rationalize themselves by claiming that they are based on real differences between various categories of living being. These differences come to have meaning and value only within very specific social parameters.