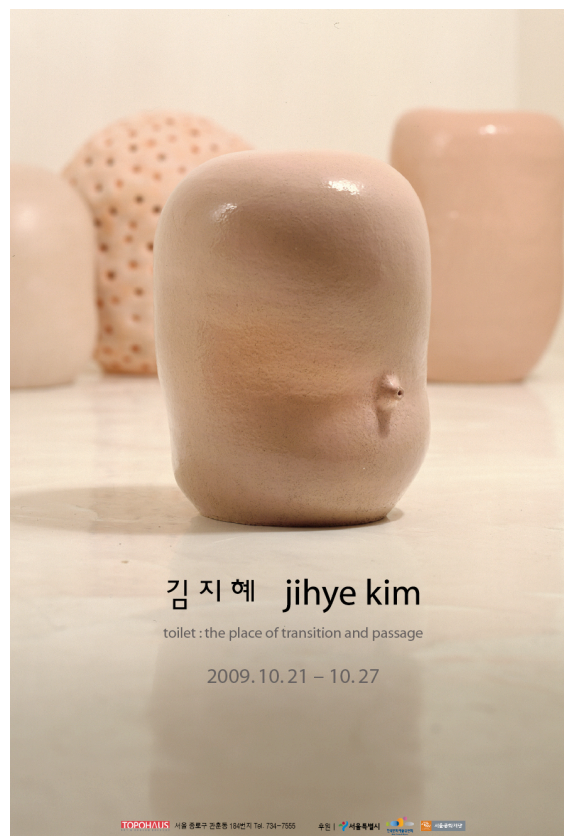


toilet: the place of transition and passage

jihye kim | 2009.10.21 – 10.27 | gallery topohaus, Seoul, Korea

toilet-the feminine-ceramics

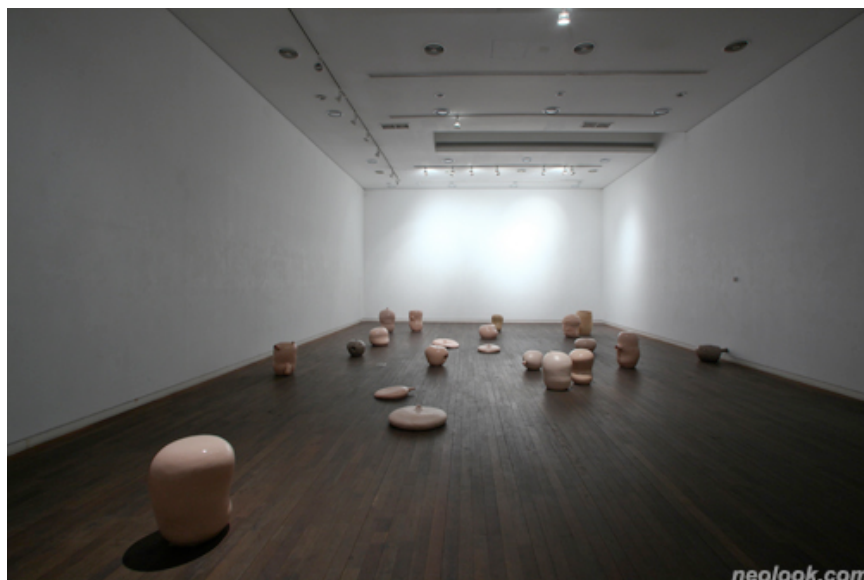
toilet: the place of transition and passage, a research-based exhibition on toilet, is the study of the associations between toilet, the feminine, and ceramics. As a ceramic artist and feminist scholar, my interest is placed on somewhere overlapping or blurring two different spheres. The feminine, ceramic, and toilet are closely interlinked in that they have been existing as a constitutive outside for system, a volatilized basis, and a passage toward other modes. I follow Luce Irigaray who redefines the feminine as a passage for intersubjectivity based on in-between and maternal/feminine which were overlooked by western discourse. I hereafter attempt to redefine toilet as an in-between space or a passage, not as a fixed and passive vessel containing excrement, based on Irigaray's theory on the feminine.



there's no woman? the feminine and the body

Body represented as feminine was erased as mind became a subject over body. We exist as a body, but body was excluded from western discourse of subjectivity. It was psychoanalysis bringing body back to the account of subjectivity, but the body they brought was masculine body which was negated by serving as a sort of reference that distinguishes feminine body. While men attempt to thrive as they dispel their body and remain as a spiritual being, feminists' rediscovery on feminine body was to represent the coexistence of differences and the logic of pluralism to strategize them.

Irigaray claims that female representation is impossible and there is no sexual difference in western discourse. This is different from the notion that women were denounced as inferiority by binary opposition. Irigaray argues that there has been only one sex, masculine, not two. In this economy, male has occupied both sides of dichotomy and defined female as a counterparty that proves the existence of male. Here, female serves only as a mirror that merely speculate male subject and as a condition or base which Western discourse must be excluded for that economy to operate. Thus, Irigaray noted that "any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the 'masculine'"* and raised a question on the way binary thinking operates the logic of self-identity while starting to search the traces of feminine body.



* Luce Irigaray (1985). *Speculum of the Other Woman*. trans. by Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca and NY: Cornell University Press: 133.

then, where is woman? "the feminine" as a forgotten passage

The feminine, the maternal are instantly frozen by the "like" the "as if" of that masculine representation dominated by truth, light, resemblance, identity. By some dream of symmetry that itself is never ever unveiled. The maternal, the feminine serve (only) to keep up the reproduction-production of doubles, copies, fakes, while any hint of their maternal elements, of the womb, is turned into scenery to make the show more realistic.

Luce Irigaray (1985). *Speculum of the Other Woman*.
Ithaca and NY: Cornell University Press: 265.

Of the path in between. Of the "go-between" path that links two "worlds," two modes, two methods, two measures of replicating, representing, viewing, in particular the sun, the fire, the light, the "objects," and the cave. Of this passage that is neither outside nor inside, that is between the way out and the way in, between access and egress. This is key passage, even when it is neglected, or even especially when it is neglected, for when the passage is forgotten, by the very fact of its being reenacted in the cave, it will found, subtend, sustain the hardening of all dichotomies, categorical differences, clear-cut distinctions, absolute discontinuities, all the confrontations of irreconcilable representations....Between the "world outside" and the "world inside," between the "world above" and the "world below." Between the light of the sky and the fire of the earth. Between gaze of the man who has left the cave and that of the prisoner. Between truth and shadow, between truth and fantasy, between "truth" and whatever "veils" the truth. Between reality and dream. Between...Between...Between the intelligible and the sensible. Between good and evil. The one and the many. Between anything you like...But what has been forgotten in all these oppositions, and with good reason, is how to pass through the passage, how to negotiate it-the forgotten transition.

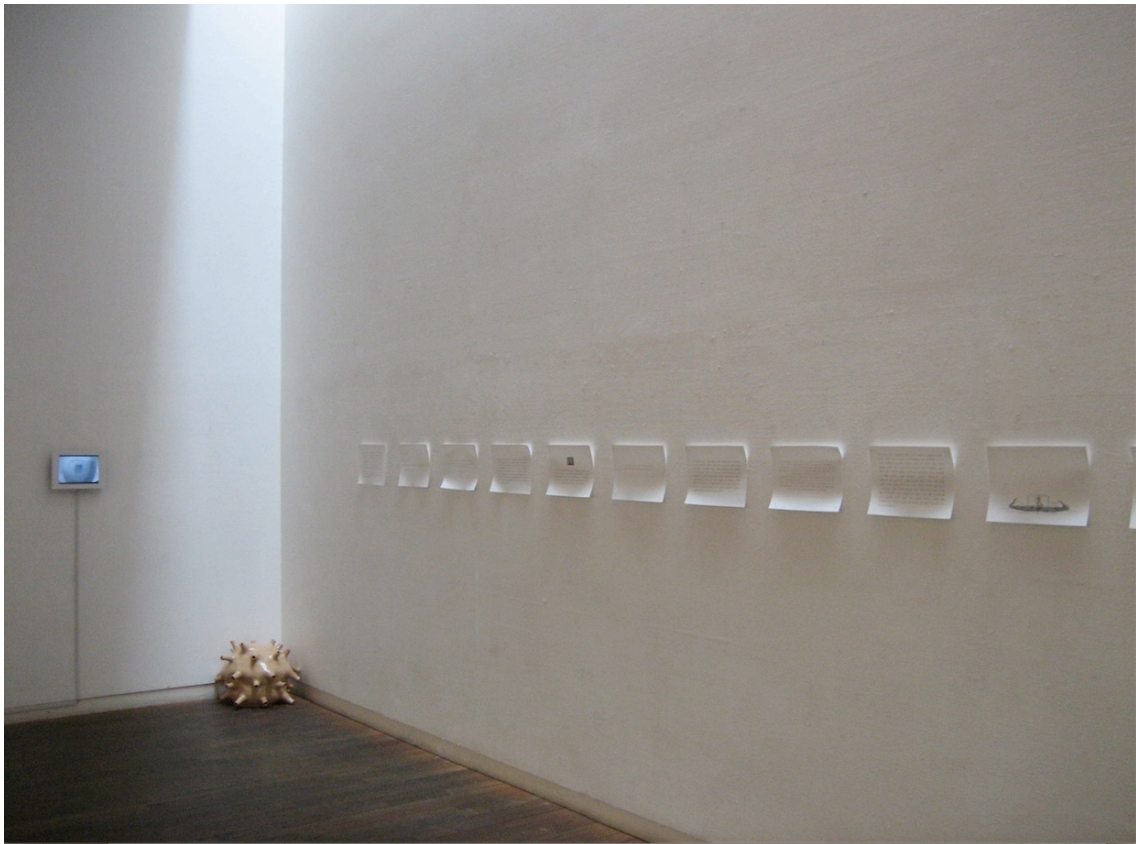
Luce Irigaray (1985). *Speculum of the Other Woman*.
Ithaca and NY: Cornell University Press: 246-247.

Irigaray dates back to Plato to trace volatile female body. She eventually finds out how "feminine" and the concept of "in-between" are represented, more precisely how they "removed." Irigaray apprehends the cave as the maternal "womb (hystera)" that Plato had to flee for the sake of the truth, the meaningless entrance of the cave as a "passage" and the sun which was the only truth as a symbolic father. Crucial to this Plato's allegory of the cave in which represents the process of the birth of knowledge and truth, maternal/feminine body is eliminated for the truth, being represented as father. Leaving the cave is to deny maternal body and forget the passage connecting the cave and the outside world. In other words, it is about forgetting the medium of representation (maternal/feminine) and the process of representation (passage signified as forgotten vagina).

Irigaray recovered the maternal medium by discovering the "forgotten passage" that connects materiality and rationality in the process of deconstructing Plato's cave. What was forgotten was the "passage" when the reason establishes itself as an origin by

hiding its reliance on body, materiality. Irigaray witnessed the removal of interval, or intersubjectivity, which links two realms. Materiality became unrepresentable and was demoted to constitutive outside by negating the passage between materiality and reason. Irigaray demonstrates that concept and subjectivity can arise within the dynamic interplay between materiality and reason by reviving the long neglected passage connecting materiality and reason.

This is “the feminine” declared by Irigaray, which is used as a basis that has long been concealed for the service of masculine discourse’s re-origination and which is nevertheless remained as a trace. Judith Butler calls it “excessive femininity.” On Butler’s reading, Irigaray’s notion of the feminine goes beyond the denigrated term of a traditional binary. She stated that it cannot be notified, signified or realized since there is no opposition. Such excessive feminine cannot be represented in the current sphere of representation. Irigaray’s the feminine is strategically acquired until the phallogocentric economy reveals its blind spot. Thus, Irigaray’s notion of the feminine is on transition – *forever fluid*.



“the feminine/ceramics”: ceramics embodying in-between and materiality

The elements allow Irigaray to speak of the female body, of its morphology, and of the erotic, while avoiding the dominant sexual metaphoricity which is scopical and organized around the male gaze; she can speak of it instead in terms of space and thresholds and fluids, fire, water, air, and earth, without objectifying, hypostatizing, or essentializing it. These terms are not so easily reduced to the body of one sex or the other. They are more pliable, accessible to the imagination of others and available for their private mental landscape.

Margaret Whitford (1991). *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*. London and New York: Routledge: 62.

Clay as material and ceramics as craft which comprehends domestic/decorative sense share commonalities with “the feminine” in several ways. It is because ceramics has been “unrepresentable” which was excluded, neglected and eliminated in the concept of art as we see in the context of art history discourse. Craft has been recognized as non-art, mere decoration and sometimes low art called kitsch. However, craft is the foundation of art works as maternal/feminine was concealed while serving as a basis.

What about ceramics as material? Clay, air, water and fire, necessary elements for ceramic, share common ground with maternal body which Irigaray restored from Plato’s cave. After she revived materiality from the cave, Irigaray has continuously criticized western culture for the elements to which we owe our lives. She has forcefully argues that this forgetting revolves around the erasure of sexual difference at the heart of Western culture, an erasure that gives rise to one sex-the masculine-defining the role of the other-the feminine-as existing for him and not in herself. Throughout her work, she is concerned to recall and remember the material elements-water, earth, fire, and air-out of which we are born and through which we live, together. For Irigaray, the return to materiality involves a return to maternal/feminine which is forgotten and erased in masculine logic. She does not intend to reinscribe binary of matter/form, masculine/feminine, however. The materiality she explores is the one outside of traditional definition. It refers to fundamental material, not an opposition in the sense of binary dimension and not a reflection of male. She is challenging the binary distinction between spirit and body. Such usage of material attributes not only enables her to revert framework or system, which was defined with phallogocentric languages, and allows discourse that can escape the crack.

Ceramics has great potential to transcend and serves as an intermediary between craft and art while disclosing craft which signifies clay as material and feminine. Clay as

material contracts, cracks and transforms, which reminds us of the passage recovered from the cave.



the feminine-ceramics-toilet: the place of transition and passage

Toilet is what modernism must suppress in order to construct itself: the irrational, the pathological, the psychic, the foreign, the erotic, the decorative and, most crucial here, the feminine.

Margaret Morgan (2002). "The Plumbing of Modern Life."
Postcolonial Studies. 5(2): 171.

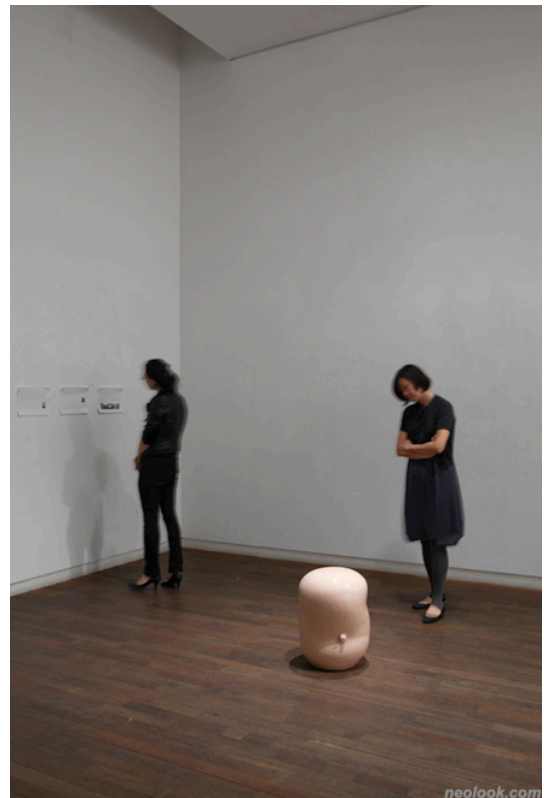
As Margaret Morgan noted that "woman, toilet: these are the apparatus by which are undone and which we abjure, in order to be who we are,"[†] toilet has been constitutive outside in western discourse as much as the feminine and ceramics. It is because toilet is the object that represents body which has conceded the status of subject to mind, volatilized body, and leaking body that shows the inescapable materiality of human being.

Toilet has been tabooed since it was closely related to excrement and its process. Excrement, which secrets from body through toilet, is "residue" and "surplus" of body. "Residue" or "surplus" find no proper place in ordinary system and the process of excrement makes the subject's identity unstable. It is because toilet consistently reminds subject which tries to deny its corporeality that it stems from material. We "see" body, which senses, perceives, breathes, eats, smells, digests, and defecates distant from the visual realm, on the toilet that we contact every day. We see our body leaking, continuously transforming into undefinable forms and transgressing the boundary of skin on toilet. This body deviates from an ideal standard or norm. It is a material matrix which was disposed in the cave a long time ago.

Toilet destabilizes and abolishes the binary distinction not only between inside/outside, also between subject/object, mind/body, socially accepted/taboo, public/private, male/female, hetero/homo, thereby abolishing the boundary. Clear boundary required by already established system of order becomes blurred and murky by toilet. Transgressing boundary blurs the distinctions, makes the membrane of the distinction porous and permeable to let all penetrate and flow to one another.

[†] Margaret Morgan (2002). "The Plumbing of Modern Life." *Postcolonial Studies*. 5(2): 175.

Therefore, toilet is an in-between space that obscures the physical and conceptual boundary of excrement, not a fixed and passive vessel containing excrement from body. In-between is connected to the logic of fluids, the space for mediation, and the invisible space where you cannot see without materiality of your eye. In-between is neither one place nor another; neither one discipline nor another; rather a third space in-between. The in-between is not a middle being, but rather a being of the middle. Being between is not about nowhere but about being somewhere in transit. being-in-relation. Toilet connects body and generates relationship. Toilet, therefore, is the passage where things for consistently happen, movement, exchange, making connection, transit.



intersubjectivity: between theory and practice

According to traditional logics, identity refers to self-identity, to identity to the same. It designates a reality which is if possible fixed, not subject to change, not modifiable by the event nor by the other. In this way it has something in common with the Platonic idea. Relational identity goes counter to this solipsistic, neuter, auto-logical ideal. It contests the cleavages sensible/intelligible, concrete/abstract, matter/form, living/dead. It also refers the opposition between being and becoming, and the fact that the plural of the one would be the multiple before being the two. Relational identity considers the concrete identity which is always identity in relation. A such, it is always metastable, becoming.....The fact of being a woman, and of having to always realize my own gender more perfectly, provides me with an anchoring in an identity which must not for all that be fixed and unchanged...When I speak of relational identity, I designate that economy of relations to the self, to the world and to the other specific to woman or to man. This identity is structured between natural given and cultural construction.

Luce Irigaray (2000). *Why Different?*
New York: Columbia University Press: 159-160.

As I mentioned at the outset, I exist between two different spheres as a feminist scholar and ceramic artist. During the research period for the exhibition, I discussed with Irigaray between feminist theory and the concept of toilet. I tried to caress between theory and practice or between material and form during my practice. I attempted to view them as subject not as object and stand between an artist and audience during the exhibition. Some time ago I have been doing research and art practice in parallel. I am afraid that some part can be absorbed by the other. I wish that “in-between”, which does not invade, rely on and consolidate with one another as discussed by Irigaray, can be made between research and art practice, a produce and I and audience and art works.