

# VIRTUAL CHORA : WELCOME

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*The urge to virtual realities of any kind relies on a constant domestic space, whether proximal or distant. The space of domesticity, configured as 'real' space, is still, already ready, the spatial envelope of the cyberventuring subject who explores the public space of the net or the virtual space of simulation. Jennifer Bloomer.*

### HOME-SITE: Homeliness of the House and its 'Feminine Hospitality'

WELCOME TO MY HOME,  
to [www.artistarkhova.org](http://www.artistarkhova.org) ...

"A house has some similarity with a tool, but, rather than a sort of thing or instrument or implement, it is the condition for all human action and reference. As a place where I can withdraw and recollect myself, it is characterized by intimacy. ... The intimacy and familiarity proper to a home presuppose that it is already human, although – in this stage of our description – it is not yet necessary to introduce the metaphysical relation of one human to the absolute Other. It demands a certain "femininity" (Paperzak, 1993:157-158)."

Femininity, before human, gives itself up to receive human, to welcome 'all human action and reference', without being, being in the house, or outside it, or anywhere else expect inside the human himself. What (outside anthropomorphism of the who) can be without being? What can welcome without owning? What can receive without asking or allowing one to give? Woman, and – animal. Two ultimate alterities, that give meaning to any other sense of otherness, closely related to each other, and both serving as a passage and a vehicle to every other Other-foreigner, and through which every man has to pass in order to relate to his God(s).

Smile, a sign of welcome into this world, of hospitality (at least, in those cultures that use this language). Traditionally women have been closely associated with the "welcoming smile" that greets one at the entrance of the home. Derrida addressed this relationship between hosting and femininity in his essay "A Word of Welcome" (1999) and in the book "Of Hospitality" (2000).

According to Derrida, hospitality, as it is conceived by Levinas, is primarily and essentially tied to sexual difference, and its very possibility depends on it. Furthermore, the (concept / metaphor of) Woman undermines any claim on safe ownership of any thing, since she serves as a pre-condition for the hospitality and welcoming of the home for its potential or actual owner (the same gesture is performed by Derrida when discussing the figurations of 'chora', as it will be shown later. Here it would suffice us to point out the connection of the home as a space that receives). In this case, fundamentally, the master of the property is always already in a situation of being received at his own home by so-called feminine alterity, understood as a feminine welcoming being. Here Derrida and Levinas, and another interpreter of Levinas, Peperzack, are all quick to stress that this "feminine being", or "feminine alterity", has nothing to do with empirical women (that is, stressing that it would be wrong to 'anthropomorphize' this feminine being, as Derrida usually does conclude). That is, the actual presence of a woman in a given house does not determine or undermine the feminine essence of its hospitality.

First of all, hospitality is about welcoming. It can be a word of welcome, a welcoming smile, a welcome understood in its utmost openness and passivity – openness to the other, smile at the threshold of the house, unconditional acceptance of the other. Second, hospitality is about receptivity, an ability of reason to receive, to be “more passive than any given passivity”. The owner is being received in his own house; he is being welcomed there prior to any language proper, to linguistic communication. Third, hospitality demands discretion. It is manifestation and withdrawal of the face; indirect communication; at the same time it is a silent discrete presence without transgression of the interiority to exteriority. Furthermore, hospitality is more than discrete, it is also intimate. Hospitality is about comfort, it is about serenity of being “at home” with oneself. Thus it is absolute ‘defenselessness’, a conscious and enjoyable vulnerability of feeling in a total refuge at home with oneself. This feeling of being at home with oneself refers necessarily to memory, though here without any psychoanalytic gesture, but understood as recollection: the recollection as a relation to the language of the host, recollection of meaning. And of course, following from all previous formulations, Hospitality is posed through Habitation. This relation to habitation, to home, to the interiority of the house, is a reminder of the self’s relation to its own corporeality, in some sense, since “there is not yet the”you" of the face, but the “thou” of familiarity" (Levinas).

The building up of the first ‘communal gesture’, ‘communal embryo’, starts at this point, for the figure of “the Woman”, in Derrida’s terms, allows for the next term to come in, that of, “rapport or relation”, as the I-Thou of “a silent language”, of “an understanding without words”, of “an expression in secret”. This is not yet the community proper; it is a rehearsal of community, it is a kind of preparation, a building of a flesh on which community will be able to stand and to flourish. This relation/rapport between feminine alterity or home, and the owner / masculine subject, does not yet have a dimension of height, that is so important for Levinas. It lacks height since Woman does not have a face in this house. She is too discrete and silent to possess such qualities. Actually, this is her role – to lack height, “height if the face”. This Hegelian division between family and community continues, though in much redefined and coveted ways. Derrida reminds us that Levinas called “feminine alterity” as fundamentally one of the modalities of welcoming, and she provides a silent refuge and asylum. In Derrida’s words: ‘If the at home with oneself of the dwelling is an “at home with oneself as in a land of asylum and refuge”, this would mean that the inhabitant also dwells there as a refugee or an exile, a guest and not a proprietor. That is the humanism of this “feminine alterity”, the humanism of the other woman, of the other (as) woman. If woman, in the silence of her “feminine being”, is not a man, she remains human.’ (Derrida, 1999:37)

What is of special interest for us here, coming back to the question of community, how the split between communal and domestic is being maintained by Levinas’s discussion of hospitality, and Derrida does not seem to question the separation as well. If the other of the community is again the feminine, “woman as other par excellence”, she does not have any place in the sphere of community. She silently prepares a ground for it, only to (pretend to) disappear. That is why it does not come as a surprise when the point of entrance of “Woman” into this discourse on hospitality occurs: with the word discretion: “the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the hospitable welcome par excellence which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.” (Levinas, cited in Derrida, 1999: 36).

And what would be non-oppositional and non-dialectical reading of this Levinas’s definition of femininity for Derrida? Derrida proposes to make of this text of Levinas “a sort of feminist manifesto” (1999:44). His reasons for this sudden and somewhat forced upon himself gesture of “becoming a feminist” are:

“For this text defines the welcome par excellence, the welcome or welcoming of absolute, absolutely originary, or even pre-originary hospitality, nothing less than the pre-ethical origin of ethics, on the basis of femininity. That gesture reaches a depth of essential or meta-empirical radicality that takes sexual difference into account in an ethics emancipated from ontology. It confers the opening if the welcome upon the”feminine being" and not upon the fact of empirical

women. The welcome, the anarchic origin of ethics, belongs to “the dimension of femininity” and not to the empirical presence of a human being of the “feminine sex.” (Derrida, 1999:44).

Without attempting oppositional or dialectical reading of either Levinas’s text or of Derrida’s propositions of feminist and androcentric interpretations, that Derrida surprisingly sees as incompatible, let us for now only remind to ourselves of one repetition. The repetition, or rather, parallel formulation, occurs in the moment of assigning to the feminine the place of possibilities of the ethical, or to the interiority and intimacy of the home the dimension of the absolute pre-original welcome. Such conception of the ethical and transcendental on the pre-requisite foundation of the feminine has been most notably formulated by Hegel. In his formulation of a relationship between family and a possibility of community famous story of Antigone plays a crucial role. We cannot rehearse it here but it would be worthwhile to mention the Irigarayan sustained interpretation of Hegelian notion of community as transcendence of the familial, or in Levinas’s terms, familiarity. Also it is important to remember for our analysis of Chora, that Derrida extensively discusses Hegel when dealing with chora’s positioning as between family and community, or as a foundation of any dialectics (Derrida, 1997).

Positioning feminine alterity within walls of the home does not only fixes the notion of the feminine (and here I mean spatial fixation, architectonic, in Derrida’s terms) – it also fixes the notion of the home in a form of intimate inhabitation cum refuge / asylum. It insists upon such notion of the home.

Within this discussion of home one is wondering when following Derrida’s logic of ‘primordial’ first home which is ‘feminine’ always by default – what does it mean for such careful and politically motivated analysis (later in the “Word of Welcome” Derrida extends his discussion of home and community to the question of Zion and politics of Jewish history and mythology), for such politically motivated analysis not to discuss mother as a first home (note – I put mother and not uterus, womb or maternal body, since putting any of those words would lead my question in different directions though not without connection, political connection)?

This logic – of discussing eternal femininity of ‘any’ home exiling mother from it, and with it, of any possibility of even coming back to the question of pregnancy as homing and welcoming, this logic has profound consequences for philosophical and political concepts of space, time, home, welcoming of the other and hospitality. This logic also has a direct connection to the treatment of cyberspace in its both scientific and aesthetic figurations.

#### **PATH NAME: VIRTUAL CHORA**

[www.virtualchora.com](http://www.virtualchora.com) is a place  
I prepared for you  
where you can enjoy all hospitality  
you can desire in cyberspace...  
No password required (or anonymous)  
Path / Server Name: Virtual Chora

#### **Unconditional Receptivity of Chora**

One major quality that marries home and chora is not their belonging to the kin of the feminine, as some might expect. As the femininity of both home and chora is not a quality but a necessity, or necessary consequence, as it seems to me. This bond between the home and chora is unconditional receptivity. Hospitality is part of both so essentially, that in some philosophical elaborations on chora and home we can interchange them without disrupting the drive of the argument (another interchange would be with ‘matrix’ though usually a hidden one, but that is a matter of our concern elsewhere). Certainly, this no-where condition of chora and home (through its singular uniqueness) is particularly beneficial when applied to WWW. Information (and technologies that facilitate its flows) has been visualized / imagined / described and even implemented in temporal-spatial terminology of a big ban, collapse into a dot: as technological time was supposed to lapse into an instant, a moment, a point; a technological space in its own

turn was supposed to shrink, geography loose its significance. In stead of making time-space to disappear, this movement of thought and effort has magnified techno-time to eternity and immortality through liberating it from linearity and a collection of 'virtually indestructible' records, while space has never been imagined as expansive without horizon as in its technological incarnation. Macro (cosmos) and micro (atom) live peacefully together in the house of information, represented by the World Wide Web. Web that is Wide as entire World. A sphere of matter crossed over by threads of information. Depending on how we position the World in WWW, where the World is – inside our imagination or transforming into the entire Universe.

However, this unconditional receptivity of chora is two-fold and can never be simply assumed: chora has a spatial dimension, and hence the sense of a home, a maternal touch, a body, creative interiority without limits, inverted inside out of itself at any moment. Just like in hospitality, unconditional welcome goes hand in hand with the law, the responsibility, the system. Their interplay and constant tension makes ethics possible. Ethics is somewhere a by product of the tension between "unconditional hospitality and, on the other hand, the rights and duties that are the conditions of hospitality" (Derrida, 2000:147). Hospitality and receptivity of the chora seem to be in line with discussions on interactivity, especially in relation to the user-centred products. In an interactive art-work or a commercial product, as many have noted, responsibility is pushed to the user / buyer / visitor, and it grows with the degrees of freedom and number of choices. It is a fake, on the one hand, and not at all, on the other. First, most of the decisions to be made are of no consequence to the product, and all pre-defined by safe rules of the game (e.g., interactivity in many net-works is of the same kind like changing a desktop color). On the other hand, it is still about decision making, and more and more decisions every day are pushed to us, in the name of interactive experience and consumer choices. What is the role of an artist in relation to this 'receptivity' and 'hospitality'? It seems like in each work we have to make decisions every step of the way, and Virtual Chora is on-going project in this sense.

As Derrida suggests, 'Chora receives' all the interpretations of her without receiving them, and without receiving anything for herself. 'She does not possess anything as her own. She "is" nothing other than the sum or the process of what has just been inscribed "on" her, on the subject of her, on her subject, right up against her subject, but she is not the subject or the present support of all these interpretations, even though, nevertheless, she is not reducible to them. Chora is not that chaos or Gaia from which everything comes to light. She should not be reduced to 'the anthropomorphic form' (that is, of a woman, mother, nurse).

“And yet, to follow this other figure, although it no longer has the place of the nurse but that of the mother, khōra does not couple with the father, in other words, with the paradigmatic model. She is a third gender / genus (48e); she does not belong to an oppositional couple, for example, to that which the intelligible paradigm forms with the sensible becoming and that looks rather like a father / son couple” (child from an earlier passage has been named here ‘son’, and this subtle transition leaves all women (that is, daughters) out of discourse on khōra. Derrida continues: ‘The “mother” is supposedly apart. And since it’s only a figure, a schema, therefore one of these determinations which khōra receives, khōra is not more of a mother than a nurse, in no more than a woman. This triton genos is not a genos, first of all because it is a unique individual. She does not belong to the “race of women” (genos gynaikōn). Khōra marks a place apart“. As she is left out of law, she does not belong to the realm of ethics, she is privileged to be left out of law, but it also gives her no place and we cannot, it means, have a relationship with her, especially daughters. She is space, khōra, always virtual, always that profound philosophical and scientific zero, nothingness. So,”Khōra marks a space apart, the spacing which keeps a dissymmetrical relation to all that which, “in herself”, beside or in addition to herself, seems to make a couple with her. “In the couple outside of the couple, this strange mother who gives place without engendering can no longer be considered as an origin. She/it eludes all anthro-po-theological schemes, all history, all revelation, and all truth (I find this totalising ‘all’ to be rather a desire, a desire to couple with her as a place of nothingness, as a freedom from this ‘all’ – I.A.). Preoriginary, before and outside of all generation, she no longer even has the meaning of a past, of a present that is past. Before signifies no temporal anteriority. The relation of independence, the nonrelation, looks more like the relation of the interval or the spacing to what is lodged in it to be received in it.” (Derrida, 1995).

Allow me to take a short detour to discuss this insistence that we need a third in order to go beyond and come back safely to two figures – man and woman. As if ‘she’ in place of chora does not mean something unavoidable, a place of a sacrificial animal, a divine sacrificial animal – a virgin. Besides being involved into this economy of exchanges, a virgin serves as a convenient substitute whenever the need arises to keep a man sane (that is, in his ontological, intelligible dimension, and in relation to the sensible). By simple gesture of assigning a third gender to chora (and to home, to the hospitality of any home), philosophy and Derrida reveal a secret that so far there has been only one gender all along. And Irigaray has been most insistent on this point - we have had so far only a genus of men and others, non-men (women, animals, foreigners, nature), without a dynamic between them. No matter how long one would philosophise in an attempt to rescue oneself from the patriarchal circuit with evoking chora/ hospitality as the third genus, or the animal, or the interval. Two thousand years at least, and philosophers are still trying to think of an ethics going around the sexual difference. Not as if we know what it is – ‘what’ is not a concern here anyway. But is this third gender, that is, the second feminine, opens some space to try? This is an attempt too, just like for Socrates or Derrida himself in his collaboration with architecture, with Peter Eisenman (Derrida, 1997).

Indeterminacy, unpredictability of any welcoming presupposes an interrogation by responsibility on both sides of the home, that ultimately fuse one into another – host becomes a hostage in her own home through her own hospitality. This is a quality of ethical relation – you give yourself, you are taken without giving yourself to a hostage situation. Any time you welcome someone you are giving yourself up. Am I up to it? I am not romanticising or valorising you as a guest. Actually, there is a part of duty for your as a guest too, before you can become one, and the conditions are outlined in my home-site, the preparation for chora, in [www.aristarkhova.org](http://www.aristarkhova.org). I am not masquerading myself under the name of an exotic woman with an exchange value higher than I have been assigned already. This is not a work about masks or transformations offered by cyberspace. This is a simple gesture of welcoming, a smile of a threshold of a door, of an opening.

### **Visualised Receptivity: Nothingness - O - Interval**

Chora marks space apart. She is as an interval, as a spacing in-between, an X that can take any form it receives. This is the integral part of leaving marks, of writing, and of language as a whole – empty spaces and silences, that can add millions to one single number or open up a space to

listen. Especially women have been prescribed silence. However, silent woman, as much as she is 'proper', is a dangerous creature. We must be kept silent, but NOT by our own decision. If it is our own, then we seem to bother, to disturb silence. What do we conceal? Many have insisted recently that there is nothing for us to conceal. There have been loud cries that we conceal nothing. The Nothing. Woman conceals nothing – that was the main secret. She (chora) does not exist though gives place to everything existing. What does it mean – to be no thing, to non-be, Being and thing are so far closely related?

Ironically, our relation to nothing is not the one of "X" or a sum –  $n+n+n\dots$  – how Derrida writes of chora, that she is "X" that can take any form, any letter. But nothing has been positioned as zero - "O". And I propose to think of CHORA not as X, but as "O", following our historical relation to the nothingness. In "The Book of Nothing" John Barrow (2002) traces how only 4 cultures in the histories of civilizations known to us, have had a concept of "O", - Egypt, Babylon, Mayan and Indian civilizations. Their representations of "O" varied, though all of them conceived of 'zero' to signify a space left in-between other numbers, space out – just like in Derrida's interpretations of chora. They have developed different images of zero, remarkably all resembling a shell, or a circle, or a half circle. As if the empty space that signifies multiplication has to contain a space inside itself to represent the space / interval it substituted.

Greeks and Romans did not have zero, that's why Roman numbers do not have it. Later Western culture adopted Arabic numerical system that was borrowed from India. Indian civilizations did not only see zero as a space to signify numerical system, but developed a complex relation to it as a notion of Nothing, both philosophical and theological. Zero, sunya, meant "atmosphere, ether, immensity of space, a point, a sky, complete and a hole", among other meanings. Barrow writes that Indians had a conception of nothing as a generative space, and not only as a disappearance (like in Greek tradition). However, in Western tradition nothingness and emptiness continued to be treated with suspicion and fear, even though zero was adopted for calculations in the early Middle Age. I propose to see the relation between chora as cosmic and the attitude to the concepts of cyberspace and nothingness as a fruitful ground for further cyberfeminist analysis, though I do not have space to elaborate on it more here. Of course it would also be important, as Derrida warned us, not to collapse chora with Greek conceptions of Gaia or chaos ('another' feminine place).

Irigaray discusses the issue of chora both in Plato and Aristotle. While in *Speculum* she relates chora to the issues of visible, sensible and intelligible, and to its 'virginity' (following Plato), she explicitly takes the notion of Interval in relation to chora in her essay "Place, Interval, A Reading of Aristotle" (Irigaray, 1993). She writes: "if the matrix is extendable, it can figure as the place of place". Of course being aware that chora has been named as place of place too, Irigaray brings back the relationship between embodiment, place and matrix. Man cannot separate the first and the last place, and that leads philosophical tradition to downshift both in its relation to the unique mother and the unique God. As such, this split still has to be resolved. As for 'woman', writes Irigaray, she is place, and therefore, without place – like chora. She is receiving without being received, without interval for herself, that would allow herself to be received in a place. As a consequence, we have infinity without possibility of arresting the fall (Irigaray, 1993:38). This is a highly political question, especially for discussions of cyberspace and sexual difference. Infinity without a possibility of arresting the fall – for a woman only. Woman remains the container for the world, since she is nothingness. However, being container for the world and for the child (son), she does not become a container for herself, endlessly falling into metaphors of chora, matrix, abyss, multiplication, etc. "The womb, for its part, would figure rather as place. Though of course what unfolds in the womb unfolds in function of an interval, a cord, that is never done away with. Hence perhaps, the infinite nostalgia for that first home? The interval cannot be done away with" (Irigaray, 1993:38). Universe and cyberspace are conceived as closed vessels, the receptacle of all elements. There is still no escape in our notions of cyberspace from this nostalgia, this longing for the first (Woman) and last (God) home. In my work I am trying to find an interval, an instance of distancing from the regression into utero, to re-enact a place in female placelessness. But it has to be an ethics in cyberspace, it has to be a relation. I have to be received in order to welcome someone else in my place, in my home. This would be possible, I believe, if discussion of chora would include pregnancy, matrix and discussion of hospitality and home would connect to it as

well. We have to remember first home in philosophical tradition, in order to respect an interval, in order to leave space without necessarily filling it up with “O”. That is, without reducing chora to cosmology or ontology.

’The discourse of chora thus plays for a philosophy a roles analogous to that which chora “herself” plays for that which philosophy speaks of, namely, the cosmos formed or given form according to the paradigm. It is out of this cosmos that will be drawn ... figures for describing chora: receptacle, imprint-bearer, mother or nurse. ... Philosophy cannot speak directly about that which they approach, in the mode of vigilance or of truth... The dream is between the two, neither one nor the other. Philosophy cannot speak philosophically of that which looks like its “mother”, its “nurse”, its “receptacle”, or its “imprint-bearer”. As such, it speaks only of the father and the son, as if the father engendered it all on his own. (Derrida, 1997:30). Hence: Nostalgia. It seems to remain the same in cyberspace. Why? ’Because this apparent nostalgia-free zone is, in fact, nothing if not nostalgic, a repression of “home-sickness” so extreme that something is not quite being covered up" (Bloomer, 1996:164).

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When users decide to upload their files into [www.virtualchora.com](http://www.virtualchora.com) a variety of technologies have been used to open the door of this home-site as wide as possible. But of course, we are not only hosts, we are always also guests... This has been made clear to me as soon as the actual action of users was understood by those who host my web-work. And after some negotiations with the main server owners we had to set up our own server (and soon we will have to move it as well), as our hosts felt that the risk is too high – to open the door so wide, to eliminate password. What if guests decide to feel like at home, not as guests? Or, to destroy our home, to be hostile? Or just in whatever way they would decide to pass through this space using it as an exchange stop between each other (sharing files, for example). I have been ready to receive whatever guests could offer us, could give us or not give, even though you can never be ready once and for all. But one can make an effort to hospitality, only to make it again. And space – home – chora seems to be integral to hospitality, just like duties, rules and politics of a relation are. Virtual is not disembodied, and does not play out opposition between on-line and off-line, flesh and net-communities. Virtual here is about ‘medium’ through which chora operates. In this work I wanted to tease out embodied investment of power relations in cyberspace. It is a tactic to strategize a certain act, **the act of welcoming**, and to leave the effect unpredictable as it is always unpredictable already.

The work is still in progress, as long as we enjoy hospitality of the owners of the physical space our server is placed inside. But it also means that I would not want to write of it yet in the form of documentation, of something that is dead, ready for autopsy. It still receives, it still archives its records. Next step – whether chora leaves memory.

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