

# THE **M** WORD

*Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*



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*Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*

EDITED BY  
MYREL CHERNICK AND JENNIE KLEIN



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*To our mothers:*

*Sue Klein*

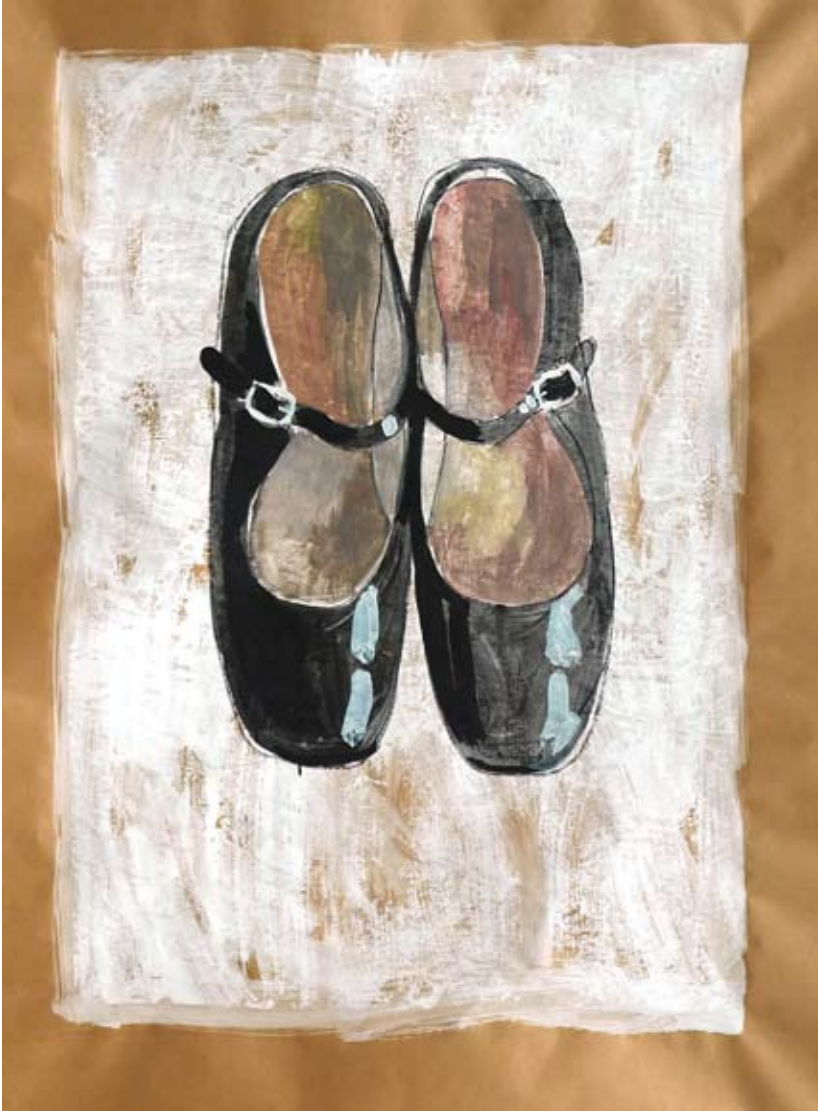
*and*

*Anne Chernick*  
*(1918–2006)*



IN MEMORIAM

**Valérie Roy**  
(1965–2010)



*Black Children's Shoes*, 2008. Acrylic and pastel on Kraft paper, 53 × 43 inches.

Artist, Mother, Friend



*Sailor Jacket Size 4*, 2009. Acrylic and pastel on Kraft paper, 43 × 53 inches.



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An earlier version of "The Body in Question: Rethinking Motherhood, Alterity and Desire" by Andrea Liss appeared in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, eds. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

A previous version of Nancy Gerber's "We Don't Talk About Mothers Here: Seeking the Maternal in Holocaust Memoir and Art" was published in the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, Volume 12.1 (Spring/Summer 2010).

Mignon Nixon's "Epilogue" was first published as the final chapter of her book *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

Maria Assumpta Bassas Vila's essay "S.O.S.: Searching for the Mother in the Family Album" was first published in *n.paradoxa* 16 (July 2005).

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An earlier version of "Art Between Us" by Ellen McMahon was published in *The Oldest We've Ever Been: Seven True Stories of Midlife Transitions*, ed. Maud Lavin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008).

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MYREL CHERNICK AND JENNIE KLEIN

## Introduction

*Motherhood within early feminist struggles and still today interferes with retrograde myths of the avant-garde. Motherhood, especially feminist motherhood, confuses the normalized order of gender and power. Feminist motherhood complicates the dominant institutionalized idea of motherhood.*

—Andrea Liss<sup>1</sup>

AS ANDREA LISS TRENCHANTLY ARGUES, from its inception the feminist art movement has at best ignored mothers and at worst been downright hostile to motherhood and maternity. In the mid-1970s Laura Silagi was one of many women who moved to Los Angeles in order to study at the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW), the first educational program devoted exclusively to the education of feminist artists. The Feminist Studio Workshop was located in the Los Angeles Woman's Building, an institution that housed the Sisterhood Bookstore and the FSW, as well as women's art galleries and artists' studios. Silagi had previously been part of a group that successfully lobbied the University of California, San Diego, to provide childcare. When she arrived at the Woman's Building, she was shocked to discover that an institution supposedly founded on egalitarian feminist principles was so unwelcoming to mothers and their children: "While there was support for art dealing with certain issues, support for those of us, both lesbian and heterosexual, who had children was totally lacking. In fact, we faced overt hostility when it came to the subject of motherhood and children."<sup>2</sup>

This attitude towards motherhood stood in stark contrast to the philosophy of cultural feminism espoused by the Building's founders and participants. An important tenet of cultural feminism was that women's bodies were sacred because of their connection to nature, the goddess, and a prehistoric matriarchal society. Childbirth was a central compo-

ment of the celebration of the female body. In reality, though, the actual child, with his or her constant needs and demands, was not part of this celebration. It is telling that Judy Chicago, one of the founders of the Woman's Building and the creator of a large-scale tapestry series about childbirth (*Birth Project* 1980–1985), told another mother at the FSW, Helen Million Ruby, that Ruby had to choose between her children and her art.<sup>3</sup> Chicago believed that she was only stating a fact, not giving an ultimatum. Silagi and the other women with small children—Ruby, Christy Kruse, Suzanne Siegel, and Gloria Hajduk—responded by founding Mother Art in 1974, one of the first collectives to come out of the Woman's Building. Their first project was to build a playground in the parking lot. Their second project for the Woman's Building, in 1975, was to organize the exhibition *By Mothers*. The intent was to demonstrate to the other women artists (most of whom were childless and in their early twenties) that motherhood was a legitimate subject for feminist art.

In the United States in 1975, there was little support in either the feminist or art worlds for women who were both mothers and artists. Two classic feminist texts about motherhood, creativity, and ambivalence—Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot*—would not be published until the following year.<sup>4</sup> While there were a few prominent women artists who had children, such as Louise Nevelson and Sheila de Bretteville, the fact that they were mothers was not evident in their artwork. Although feminism has made radical incursions into the male-dominated art world during the past thirty years, mothers and the representation of motherhood remain on the margins of art practice. As recently as 1992, when Susan Bee and Mira Schor, the editors of the art journal *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, organized a forum on motherhood and art, although they received a high percentage of responses to their request for participation, more than one artist wondered how the editors had found out that they had children, “so separate had children been kept from art world life.”<sup>5</sup> The contributions to the forum that Bee and Schor did receive all concerned the difficulty of balancing one's career as an artist with one's identity as a mother. “Being a mother and an artist: hard,” responded Joan Snyder, a well-known painter. She continued, “Being a mother is being a mother. Being an artist means doing your work. You need time and you need help, years and years of help.”<sup>6</sup>

It has taken a surprising amount of time for motherhood to be regarded as a serious topic for feminists and feminist artists.<sup>7</sup> In comparison with other feminist topics such as lesbian identity, feminism and popular

culture, and female sexuality, in art the subject of maternity is only beginning to receive attention. A number of women artists who make work about their experience as mothers, many of them included in this book, are now being awarded prestigious gallery shows, reviews in art publications, and tenure. There is a growing bibliography, of which Andrea Liss's 2009 book, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, is the most recent example, which deals with the (sometimes uneasy) alliance among feminism, feminist art, and the representation of motherhood. Journals such as *Hypatia*, *Genders*, and *n.paradoxa* have published articles on the representation of motherhood in film and popular culture.<sup>8</sup> Routledge recently published a monograph on Bobby Baker, a British artist who has made objects and performances about middle-class motherhood, depression, and cooking since the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> *The Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* devoted an issue to "Mothering, Popular Culture, and the Arts" (Spring/Summer 2003). At the 2009 meeting of the College Art Association, several panels were devoted to motherhood, including two intriguingly titled "Mothers of Innovation I and II." Art historian Rachel Epp Buller is presently compiling an anthology of historical writing and artists' writing entitled *Reconciling Art and Motherhood*.<sup>10</sup> There have also been several exhibitions of artwork that deal with the representation of motherhood in the past ten years.<sup>11</sup> This anthology, in development since 2006, thus contributes to the growing interest in examining the relationship between the maternal and the practice of art and also documents the changing reception of motherhood in the visual arts.

\*\*\*

*The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* is a reflection—or mirror—of the possibilities for mothering today. It includes personal essays, critical and historical writing, interviews, and artwork that explore how women artists and writers have grappled in their work with their identity as mothers. The women in this anthology attempt an honest portrayal of motherhood in a society where mothers are either sanctified for their selfless love or blamed for their children's problems. In examining the effect of motherhood on their work, these artists and writers explore the complex and ambivalent emotions associated with motherhood, countering the pervasive and popular myth of unconditional, all-sacrificing mother love. The title "M Word" alludes to the fact that many artists, such as those approached by Bee and Schor for inclusion in the special issue of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, actually conceal their identity as mothers in order to be taken seriously in an art world that does not value motherhood.

The predominantly white and middle-class feminists who came to study at the Woman's Building in the 1970s assumed that their experiences were shared by most women. The assumptions of those second-wave feminists have since been challenged on a number of fronts: by women of color, by critics informed by postmodern and postcolonial theories of identity and subjectivity, and by the rapid communication among cultures enabled by our globalized, electronically connected world. Advances in reproductive technologies have also enabled a wider spectrum of people to become parents, especially gay and lesbian couples. Today, there exists a plethora of feminisms and a conception and construction of motherhood that takes into account the diverse nature and experiences of mothers and families in an interconnected global society.<sup>12</sup>

*The M Word* promotes multiple visual, historical, and critical readings of motherhood as well as international and historical perspectives on motherhood and the visual arts. The writers and artists included in this book represent a diverse group of ages, races, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds, united by a commitment to feminist mothering. We have actively recruited artists and writers that practice outside of the United States, and we are pleased to include international artists such as Silvia Ziranek (United Kingdom), Johanna Tuukkanen (Finland), Leslie Reid (Canada), Signe Theill (Germany), Mónica Mayer and Patricia Cué (Mexico), Youngbok Hong (Korea), Maria Assumpta Bassas Vila (Spain), and Margaret Morgan and Denise Ferris (Australia). *The M Word* includes work by and about artists of color, artists who have lost custody of their children, artists who identify as lesbian, and artists who have struggled with infertility or are dealing with the process of adoption.

*The M Word* reflects the growing interest in the role that motherhood and maternity have played in contemporary feminist visual representation, as both a metaphor for creation and creativity and as lived experience informing the artist's work. The crucial precedent for the work presented in this anthology is Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*. A chronicle of the first four years of her son's life, written and represented through the prism of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, *Post-Partum Document* was a watershed when it was first exhibited and later published in a book version in the early 1980s. In this rigorously conceptual artwork, Kelly's experience of raising a child from infancy to the age at which he was able to write his own name was used as a foil to interrogate psychoanalytic theory regarding maternal desire, normative psycho-social development, and the entry into the symbolic/linguistic order. Kelly, as many of the artists included here, eschewed images of the maternal body and instead

displayed objects (diapers, baby vests, plaster casts, and found objects), drawings and written words to document the intersubjective mother-child relationship. A dual discourse resulted, with Kelly's maternal fantasies and anxieties reflecting the social position of women as primary caregivers. She then wrote her own psychoanalytically informed critique of this discourse, creating a detailed examination of the complexities of maternal subjectivity that demonstrated how motherhood, far from shutting down the creative process, could be a catalyst for art making.

The contributors to this book, almost all working from the mother's perspective, have explored, documented, repudiated, confronted and analyzed aspects of the multifaceted and divided category of maternal subjectivity, a subject position that, even now, has not been fully theorized in psychoanalytic discourse.<sup>13</sup> By representing through their work the range, complexity and contradictions of their conscious and unconscious desires, artist mothers contribute to the recognition of multiple maternal subjectivities, to help counter the cultural ideology of motherhood as an idealized selflessness.

*The M Word* expands on earlier work on maternal representation, gaze, and desire. The artists and writers included in this book have been influenced by the disciplines of film, literature, and theory. E. Ann Kaplan's *Motherhood and Representation* (1992) and *Representations of Motherhood* (1994), edited by Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, while concerned primarily with filmic representation, both explored areas that had important implications for feminist artists interested in a critical practice of art making, including maternal desire and analysis of the mother as sign.<sup>14</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman's writings on the ambivalence that women feel when torn between the demands of their creative activity and those of their children in her two seminal essays "Feminist Intertextuality and the Laugh of the Mother" (1990), and "Writing and Motherhood" (presented in 1979 and published in 1985) are echoed by much of the work included in this book.<sup>15</sup> Equally vital is Suleiman's eloquent argument, in the form of a published letter exchange with Raquel Portillo Bauman published in *Signs*, for the relevance of psychoanalysis as a critical tool in understanding language and representation, even as she acknowledges its limitations.<sup>16</sup>

Along with Suleiman, we feel that psychoanalytic theory, which has informed many of the writings about motherhood and maternity, is central to any understanding of motherhood and maternity. The debate within psychoanalysis over an innate, essential femininity versus a sexuality constructed and defined by culture began in the early twentieth century. Psychoanalysts and theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray in

France and Nancy Chodorow in the U.S. criticized Freud as phallogentric, while others—including Kelly, Suleiman, Gallop, and other writers in this volume—found that Jacques Lacan’s exploration of sexual difference as never fixed, but based on an unfulfilled desire for the phallus by both sexes, opened up a space for feminist critique and revision.<sup>17</sup> In Lacan’s theory there is no unified, pre-given subject. The sexual subject is constructed, created through loss, and defined by a patriarchal language and culture that he called the symbolic. Other key Lacanian terms referred to directly and indirectly in this book—and diagrammed by Kelly in *Post-Partum Document*—include his concept of the mirror stage, where the child’s fictional mirror image becomes the model for its future identifications; the imaginary, which represents the original mother/child dyad that is broken by the introduction of the oedipal father; and the real as the locus of unfulfilled desire.<sup>18</sup> The work of Melanie Klein, a major psychoanalyst and theorist on the other side of the debate, has also been important for feminists. In this volume, Mignon Nixon refers to Kleinian theory in examining the powerful and complicated work of Louise Bourgeois, who herself had considered studying child analysis. Although feminists have disagreed with aspects of Klein’s depiction of femininity as innate, she is important for her stress on the pre-oedipal relationship, allowing for the introduction of aggression and destruction into the picture of the self-sacrificing mother.<sup>19</sup>

Marianne Hirsch has examined the relationship between the family, the mother, the child, and photography in her book, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997) and in the edited volume *The Familial Gaze* (1999).<sup>20</sup> Hirsch’s essay “Maternal Exposures,” included in *Family Frames*, examines the implications of transforming a child into an image through the work of photographer Sally Mann and the short story “Good Housekeeping” by Rosellen Brown. Many of the artists included in *The M Word* are aware of the potential repercussions of their depictions of their children through their cameras, through the mediums of painting or sculpture that result in the objects presented here.

The artists in this book are also responding to more recent work on motherhood and culture that has been motivated by the increased visibility of the maternal in the late twentieth century. In the past several years, there have been a number of books interrogating the construction of the maternal in popular culture. Informed by a number of disciplines that evolved from postmodern feminist theory such as gender and disability theory, media studies, and post-colonial theories of identity construction, this work has examined the representation of the maternal and

of motherhood as it is imbricated within popular culture. Books such as *Motherhood Misconceived*, edited by Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly, and Elaine Roth include articles that use cultural studies to locate maternity in specific ideological and socio-economic contexts in order to argue that the cinematic and tabloid representation of motherhood has remained remarkably static.<sup>21</sup> Other scholars, such as Imogen Tyler, have addressed the relationship between class, representation, and maternity in articles that look to tabloids and television in order to construct the ideology of motherhood in the twenty-first century.<sup>22</sup> In the past ten years Demeter Press has published or will publish anthologies on the politics and ideology of breast milk, motherhood and blogging, online communities, Aboriginal mothering, and mothering and hip-hop culture.<sup>23</sup>

\* \* \*

Following the example set by Mary Kelly, who insisted that her personal experience be read against a conceptual, psychoanalytic framework, *The M Word* aims to foreground the relationship among theory, practice, and imagery. We have included as much artwork as possible. In our selection of work, we have tried to avoid the traditionally sentimental images in favor of work that is rigorously conceptual. With that in mind, we have included artist's pages with images and statements in three sections, text/image pieces made specifically for this book, and performance scripts written by artists whose work is informed by late twentieth-century conceptual practices taught in art schools. We have illustrated the stories, articles, and reflections with additional images. Throughout the book, we have done our best to maintain the balance between the theorization and representation of motherhood and the use of the maternal in contemporary art.

The book is organized into three sections of writing and three of artwork. The artwork sections, II, IV and VI, consist of artists' statements and multiple reproductions of each artist's work. These sections also include a selection of work from four exhibitions on art and motherhood: *Maternal Metaphors I and II*, on which we collaborated; *Doublebind*, presented in Germany and Australia in 2003 and 2004, and described here by curator Signe Theill; and *Mother/mother-\**, curated by Jennifer Wroblewski and presented at A.I.R. in 2009, the first exhibit at the feminist gallery (since its inception in 1972) that focuses on maternal work. Additions to the original exhibition checklist include Wroblewski, the performance artist Johanna Tuukkanen, and the filmmaker Caroline Koebel.

The first section, “Conversations and Questions,” presents selections of previously published works by Mary Kelly, Susan Rubin Suleiman, and Andrea Liss as well as new, recent interviews with Kelly and Suleiman and a 2009 postscript by Liss. Kelly, Suleiman, and Liss first published important articles theorizing motherhood and representation around the same time that several artist mothers admitted to Susan Bee and Mira Schor that they didn’t acknowledge to the art world that they had children. In this section, as with much of the work included in this book, we wanted to both revive the initial debates around motherhood, subjectivity, and maternal desire and to look back at those debates from the vantage point of twenty years of work on maternity and maternal subjectivity.

Section I reprints excerpts from *Post-Partum Document*, including the series of Rosetta Stone images and accompanying text that document the entry of Kelly’s son, Kelly Barrie, into the symbolic order—his ability to write his own name. These excerpts are paired with two interviews, the first an exclusive interview with Mary Kelly by Margaret Morgan, and the second an interview with both Mary Kelly and Kelly Barrie by Ruth Skilbeck. The latter took place on the occasion of a collaborative installation at the 2008 Sydney Biennale that included Kelly’s Super 8 film, *Antepartum*, made in 1973, and Barrie’s video-recording *Astral Fields* made 35 years later, in 2008. Morgan’s interview is particularly significant because it situates Kelly as one of the first artists to interrogate the subjectivity of motherhood and to engage conceptually with the linguistic structures that characterize the mother/child dyad. Skilbeck’s interview brings the mother/child dyad full circle, establishing Kelly Barrie as an artist who is as versant in the meaning and signification of language and representation as was his mother thirty years earlier.

The first section also includes an interview conducted by Myrel Chernick with Suleiman as well as Suleiman’s personal essay “My Mother’s Silver Pin.”<sup>24</sup> These two pieces establish Suleiman’s own history as a Holocaust survivor and child of the Diaspora; her family moved from Budapest to Vienna, to Paris, then Haiti, New York City, and finally Chicago, all before Suleiman was twenty years of age. Suleiman, as mentioned above, has been important to contemporary theorizations of motherhood and representation due to her articulation of the ambivalence that a mother feels when she ignores a crying child in order to pursue her own creativity and her theorization of a laughing, playful maternal subjectivity that stands in contradistinction to the avant-garde construction of the mother as narrow-minded upholder of the Lacanian Law of the Father. In both the short story and the interview included here, Suleiman acknowledges another ambivalence—that of the daughter towards the



mother. Suleiman's mother was in many ways an "impossible person," yet at the same time, she embodied the laughing mother that Suleiman had initially championed, a mother whose discourse is often silenced or brutally punished in art, literature, and popular culture. Chernick's interview situates Suleiman and her theorization of motherhood within the particular context of the displaced Hungarian Jewish refugee who is also a survivor of the Holocaust.

In the final essay in this section, Andrea Liss, who is of a younger generation than Kelly and Suleiman, situates and resituates herself in relationship to the idea of the maternal. Liss's essay, "The Body in Question: Rethinking Motherhood, Alterity, and Desire," explores the relationship between Elizabeth Grosz's re-reading of Emmanuel Levinas's ethical mother and her own inability to completely give up selfhood in relationship to her child. Arguing for an acceptance of maternal giving and a deployment of the same outside of the realm of the private, Liss proposes a way of being both a feminist and a mother. At the time Liss wrote "The Body in Question," her son Miles was a student at Seven Songs Preschool. In her 2009 postscript, Liss both returns to the questions raised by the essay and anticipates an impending separation—Miles is eighteen and leaving home to attend college. Liss's postscript is both an elegy to her own maternal ethos as well as a commentary on the continued marginality of the mother in psychoanalysis and capitalist culture. Liss notes that "since the first publication of this essay in 1994 to its second appearance in 2004 and its gracious inclusion in this crucial book, it is still against the norm in the field of cultural theory and visual art writing for a feminist to proclaim herself a mother or a mother to name herself a feminist."

Section III, "Contemporary Art and the Maternal: Articulating the Maternal Metaphor in Feminist Art," and Section V, "Finding the Maternal in the Visual Field: Practice, Narratives, Images," contain writing, artwork, text/image pieces, artists' statements, and performance scripts by women from all over the world who insist that they can be both mothers and feminists; the experience of feminist mothering is one that is so central to who they are that they deliberately choose to build a body of work around and about that identity. Section III includes art-historical writing and writings by artists about the articulation in art of subjectivity by mothers who are also artists. We felt it was fitting to begin this section with Nancy Gerber's reading of the work of Francine Christophe and Alice Lok Cahana, two daughters of the Holocaust whose written and visual work recovers the legacy of the lost mothers of the Holocaust. Fitting, because the experience of being a second-generation survivor of the

Holocaust influenced Suleiman, Hirsch, and Liss (whose first book was on Holocaust memorials) to write about motherhood and maternity.<sup>25</sup> In Mignon Nixon's epilogue to her 2005 book *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*, Nixon discusses Bourgeois's relationship to Melanie Klein's theories, in her ability to depict the death drive within the mother-child relationship, and to use this as a rich resource for her art.<sup>26</sup> Nixon makes the important point that Bourgeois developed a body of work that drew upon—rather than denied—the dynamic of mothering children. For Nixon, Bourgeois's work that depicts maternal aggression from both the daughter's and mother's position exemplifies maternal ambivalence as a psychic position.

Many of the selections in Section III deal with art made about or during the 1970s, the era of second-wave feminism in which the personal was deemed political. Michelle Moravec's "Make Room for Mommy: Feminist Artists and My Maternal Musings" tells the story of Mother Art. Barbara T. Smith's "The Coffins" is a painful reflection on the breakup of her marriage and subsequent loss of custody of her children in the late 1960s, events that inspired her to make a number of Xerox books with her children's pictures.

We are pleased to include in this section writing by and about female artists outside of the United States. These demonstrate that the urge to create art about maternal identity was not limited to American artists but was an international phenomenon during this period. Mónica Mayer's "¡Madres!" describes the feminist artists' collective that she founded with Maris Bustamante in Mexico in the early 1980s, after completing the Feminist Art Program at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, and less than a decade after Mother Art. This collective was known as Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder), a popular remedy for the evil eye, a curse often directed at nursing mothers and pampered babies whose supposed plenitude and satisfaction inspired envy. Using popular humor, the collective's agenda included the promotion of women's participation in contemporary art and the creation of feminist images in order to transform the visual world. Their most ambitious project, "¡Madres!," consisted of a series of mail art pieces and performances that took place over three years, beginning with Mayer's and Bustamante's pregnancies, and culminated in an appearance on Guillermo Ochoa's *Nuestra Mundo*, a popular daytime television show, where the host was dressed as a pregnant woman and named Mother for One Day. Assumpta Bassas Vila's article, very different in tone, discusses three Catalan artists who began working in the 1970s—Fina Miralles, Eugenia Balcells, and Cori Mercadé—who approach maternal subjectivity

from both the mother's and the daughter's position. Feeling the need to redress the absence of the mother in Franco's fascist patriarchal family, these women read between the lines of the traditional family album to document the violence and restraints against women, as they recover the grandmother, the sister and what Bassas Vila calls the maternal symbolic order. Both Jennie Klein and Margaret Morgan treat contemporary maternal art practices in their respective essays "Visualizing Maternity in Contemporary Art: Race, Culture, Class," and "Home Truths." In the former, Klein analyzes the accounts of African American, immigrant, Jewish and working-class mothers in the formally diverse work—ranging from handcrafted artists books to video and computer installations—of Youngbok Hong, Patricia Cué, Gail Rebhan, Myrel Chernick, and Camille Billops. Referencing popular culture and sociological studies, Klein discusses the conflicts between the immigrant mother's desire to assimilate while simultaneously maintaining ethnic and/or racial identity as well as the difficulty of being a "good" mother when one is neither white nor middle class. Complementing Klein's article are film stills from Camille Billops' *Finding Christa* (1991), a film about Billops' reunion with her daughter, whom she gave up for adoption at age four. The film attempts to preclude closure, even though Christa's need for closure is what motivated her to contact Billops in the first place. Morgan's essay considers how the work of Catherine Opie (*Self Portrait/Nursing* 2004 and the series *In and Around Home* 2005) and Andrea Bowers (*Nothing is Neutral* 2006) "speak the truth," countering and exposing the increasingly conservative political and social environment of the waning years of the Bush administration. Morgan uses the work of Bowers and Opie to imbricate maternity and domesticity into the specific socio-political context from which they draw their meaning.

Jane Gallop, author of *The Daughter's Seduction* (1982), concludes Section III with her essay "Observations of a Mother," a collaborative piece with her partner, the photographer Dick Blau.<sup>27</sup> Gallop situates her self-examination as a photographed mother within a group of family pictures. Working through a reading of Roland Barthes's description of the "subject becoming an object" in his book *Camera Lucida*, she moves back and forth between the feminist theorist as spectator and the mother as photographed subject. Her detailed observations describe both her pleasure in and resistance to adopting the role of "She who is photographed."<sup>28</sup>

Section V, "Finding the Maternal in the Visual Field: Practice, Narratives, Images," focuses on the mother-as-subject with a collection of writings and text-image pieces by mothers who are artists and feminists. We have

attempted to include a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and life stages since too often the ideological portrayal of motherhood is confined to mothers with young children and excludes those with adopted children. The writing included here suggests that one's identity as a mother is mutable and subject to reinterpretation. Section V includes a number of pieces that pick up where *Post-Partum Document* left off—the moment at which the child writes his name and establishes an identity within the symbolic order. Appropriately, much of this work deals with language, or the use of language. British performance artist Sylvia Ziranek, who has been doing work on domesticity, maternity, family life, and the color pink since the 1970s, is represented here by five performance poems that use language that is as wildly inventive as her pink performances. Ziranek is terribly normal, worrying about getting her son away from the screen, or feeding her finicky children (TAKE OMELETTES—WE DO, ONCE A WEEK OR SO, 2006). Sherry Millner and her daughter Nadja Millner-Larsen have collaborated on a piece created for this book, *Naming Nadja*, in which the grown-up Nadja responds to Millner's process of naming her after the character created by André Breton.

Myrel Chernick's short story "The Studio Visit" and text/image piece *Time Passes* are bookends to her experience as an artist and mother. In "The Studio Visit" the protagonist reflects on her work and domestic life as she struggles with the tensions of preparing her studio for a curator's visit. She manages to both punish and reward herself for her persistence in making art. In *Time Passes*, Chernick takes a nine-hour round-trip bus ride to Boston, where her son is at university, to see him for three brief hours. As he walks her back to the subway stop, it is clear to Chernick that the separation she both longed for and dreaded is now complete. In Ellen McMahon's "Art Between Us," a narrative about her daughter Alice's creative but stormy adolescence, we see McMahon torn between her roles as artist and mother. While she finds her daughter's extraordinary creativity fascinating, it also demonstrates how troubled Alice is; one night, after staying up late working, Alice overdoses on Tylenol and has to be rushed to the hospital. McMahon fears for her daughter's health and sanity yet admires, almost to the point of envy, Alice's extreme passion and creativity, which is so all-consuming it prevents McMahon from doing her own work.

Many of the pieces included in the book are concerned with the relationship between maternity, which is life-giving, and the death drive. Mignon Nixon has suggested that the power of Bourgeois's imagery lies in its embrace of the image of the mother as an aggressive and ambivalent figure. Maternal ambivalence rises as a psychic position from

which the feminist artist can act. Maternal ambivalence is tied to the death drive, for “in extremis, Maternal ambivalence assumes the guise of mother death” (276). In Rachel Hall’s memoir, “After Long Winter,” illustrated with Sarah Webb’s *Fat and Blood* series (2004), she grapples with the ambivalence of tending for a sick child, while remembering her own childhood experience of illness. Sarah Webb’s “Milk and Tears: Performing Maternity” is about the meaning of breasts for Webb as she nursed her infant son while simultaneously nursing her mother-in-law through her unsuccessful battle with breast cancer. Webb discusses the work of Sarah Hutt and Sarah Slavick as well as her own *Milk and Tears*, an installation of diapers delicately embroidered in red thread with the words of Anne Sexton’s poem “Dreaming the Breast.”

Leslie Reid’s affective writing mourns her sons’ lost youth and expresses her deep ambivalence about their need and desire to grow and separate from her. Her photographs and paintings of ambiguous images of her children in light and shadow “evoke a dark side of her connectedness to her sons ... and recognition of both external and internal danger.” Danielle Abrams, a New York-based artist and the lesbian daughter of an African-American father and a Jewish mother, channels both her black Southern grandmother and her Jewish grandmother in her performance script “On Mommas and Mothers.” In “Pigeon Co-op or How I learned to respect my Mama,” Abrams alternates between her father’s point of view and her own, careening through pigeon coops and old photographs as she goes in search of the women who raised her father, Great and Aunt Liz. Abrams’s tributes in these pieces to her grandmothers, including one she never knew, and to a mother her father barely knew, suggest the power of maternal desire, a desire that exceeds the culturally conditioned imperative to have a baby and become a mother.

*The M Word* includes three essays that directly address the topic of maternal desire. Christen Clifford, who writes about sex and maternity, exemplifies the mother as an aggressive and ambivalent figure. This version of her script for “BABYLOVE: How My Infant Son Became the Other Man,” a ribald and hilarious performance she gave during the first few years of her son’s life, is funny and ironic, but also unsettling in its frankness, especially when Clifford describes the all-consuming and overwhelming passion she has for her son, who replaces her husband as the object of her intense desire: “He knows I’m too into him. When I feed him, he pushes my face away. He wants the breast and the milk, not the mother.” Laura Larson’s “Hidden Mother” is a poignant meditation on the death of the artist’s mother and the impending—but not yet finalized—adoption of Gadisse Larson, who quite possibly shares a birthday

with Larson's mother. Larson knows Gadisse only from photographs and descriptions and writes to her as the not-yet-known child that she is now and as the teenager that she will become. As a photographer, Larson has documented Gadisse's absence, photographing ghostly arms and pubescent spiritual manifestations. In the winter of 2010, Larson was able to bring Gadisse home. She is presently working on a book about her experience, entitled *Hidden Mother*.

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*The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* is about the work of artists who are mothers and feminists and have made this the subject of their work. It is about maternal ambivalence, but it is also about maternal desire, a desire that plays itself out from outside of the institution of motherhood. When Laura Silagi first organized Mother Art, there were no other artist/mothers with whom she and the members of Mother Art could make common cause. When putting together this book, we felt that it was important to include as many artists as we could, in order to highlight the depth and diversity of work being created. The images reproduced in the book show the process of becoming—becoming-mother for the artists and becoming-other for the children. As such, they provide a counter-narrative to the texts included in this book—a counter-narrative that both supports and exceeds these texts.

The genesis of this book began many years ago, when both of us still had children living at home. At the time we collaborated on *Maternal Metaphors I and II*, we felt that we wanted to do something more lasting than a temporary exhibition. We wanted to put together an unconventional book that acknowledged the work that had been done on motherhood and visual culture in the years since Mother Art was founded, Mary Kelly finished *Post-Partum Document* (1978), and Susan Suleiman wrote her essay "Writing and Motherhood (1979).<sup>29</sup> As we worked on the book and as our children grew older, we thought it fitting to conclude with an essay written from the perspective of one of those children: Chernick's daughter Tanya Llewellyn, now grown up and herself a writer. In "Artist Mom," Llewellyn writes articulately about what it was like to have a mother who was an artist and a feminist. Llewellyn's text is echoed elsewhere in the book—whether it be the call and response of Millner and Nadja Millner-Larsen, the collaborative work between Mary Kelly and Kelly Barrie or Patricia Cué and her daughter Julia, the wisdom of Andrea Liss's son Miles, or the invocation of the mother through the daughter/granddaughter in the work of Abrams and Suleiman. These children are able to acknowledge

the complicated maternal subjectivities presented here. It is our hope that this book will be the first of many on this topic and that mothers everywhere can relish their roles as speaking (and painting, drawing, photographing, and sculpting) subjects.

—Jennie Klein and Myrel Chernick, August 2010

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xvi.

<sup>2</sup>Laura Silagi, email to author, April 15, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, tenth anniversary ed. (New York: Norton, 1986); Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot* (1976; reprint Boston: Beacon Press, 1986). Adrienne Rich subsequently did a poetry reading at the Woman's Building in 1979.

<sup>5</sup>Susan Bee and Mira Schor, "M/E/A/N/I/N/G Forum: On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie" (1992), reprinted in *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, ed. Moyra Davey (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 200.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>7</sup>Adrienne Rich's important book was published when second-wave feminism had already been around for more than a decade.

<sup>8</sup>Rosemary Betterton, "Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination," *Hypatia* 21, no. 2 (2006): 80-100; Mary Thompson, "Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Motherhood," *Genders* 43 (2006): [http://www.genders.org/g43/g43\\_marythompson.html](http://www.genders.org/g43/g43_marythompson.html), accessed 11/27/09. Tracy LeMaster, "M/Othering the Children," *Genders* 47 (2008): [http://www.genders.org/g47/g47\\_lemaster.html](http://www.genders.org/g47/g47_lemaster.html), accessed 11/27/09; Shelly Cobb, "Mother of the Year," *Genders* 48 (2008): [http://www.genders.org/g48/g48\\_cobb.html](http://www.genders.org/g48/g48_cobb.html), accessed 11/27/2009; Jordana Aamalia, "Mad, Bad Mothers and the Deviant Event: Catherine Bell and the Maternal Instinct," *n.paradoxa* 22 (July 2008): 69-75; Andrea Liss, "Maternal Rites: Feminist Strategies," *n.paradoxa* 14 (July 2002): 24-31.

<sup>9</sup>Michèle Barrett and Bobby Baker, eds., *Bobby Baker: Redeeming Features of Daily Life* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>10</sup>Epp Buller's anthology includes essays by art historians, curators and artists and covers nineteenth- and twentieth-century art and visual culture.

<sup>11</sup>In 2003, Signe Theill curated *DoubleBind: Art/Children/Career* for Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin. Myrel Chernick curated *Maternal Metaphors* for the Rochester

Contemporary Art Center in Rochester, New York. *Maternal Metaphors II*, which was expanded considerably from the original exhibition, was mounted at the Ohio University Art Gallery, Athens, Ohio, in 2006. In December 2009, A.I.R. Gallery in New York City mounted an exhibition on motherhood and the visual arts, *Mother/mother-\**, curated by Jennifer Wroblewski (whose work with, and the work of several presenting artists, is included in this book).

<sup>12</sup>Sarah Earle and Gayle Letherby, eds., *Gender, Identity and Reproduction: Social Perspectives* (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Heléna Ragoné and France Winddance Twine, eds., *Ideologies and Technologies of Motherhood: Race, Class, Sexuality, Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Sarah Boykin Hardy and Caroline Alice Wiedmer, eds., *Motherhood and Space: Configurations of the Maternal through Politics, Home, and the Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>13</sup>Suzanne Juhasz, "Mother-Writing and the Narrative of Maternal Subjectivity," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4.4 (2003): 395-425.

<sup>14</sup>E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation* (London/New York: Routledge, 1992); Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, eds., *Representations of Motherhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup>"Feminist Intertextuality and the Laugh of the Mother" was published in Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 141-180. "Writing and Motherhood" was included in Suleiman's collection of essays *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 13-37.

<sup>16</sup>Suleiman, "On Maternal Splitting: A Propos of Mary Gordon's 'Of Men and Angels,'" *Signs* 14.1 (Autumn 1988): 25-41; Raquelle Portillo Bauman, "Comment on Suleiman's 'On Maternal Splitting,'" *Signs* 15.3 (Spring 1990): 653-655; Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Reply to Bauman," *Signs* 15.3 (Spring 1990): 656-659. Suleiman included the exchange under the title "Motherhood and Identity Politics: An Exchange," in *Risking Who One Is*, 55-66.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), 31-32.

<sup>19</sup>Elizabeth Wright, ed., *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 191-193.

<sup>20</sup>Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Marianne Hirsch, ed., *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover, University Press of New England, 1999).

<sup>21</sup>Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly, and Elaine Roth, eds., *Motherhood Misconceived: Representing the Maternal in U.S. Films*. (Albany: State University of New York, 2009), 5.

<sup>22</sup>Imogen Tyler, "'Chav Mum, Chav Scum': Class Disgust in Contemporary



Britain,” *Feminist Media Studies* 8.2 (June 2008): 17-34; “‘Celebrity Chav’: Fame, Femininity and Social Class,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13.3 (August 2010): 375-393.

<sup>23</sup>Dawn Meme Lavell-Harvard and Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, eds., *Until Our Hearts Are On the Ground: Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2006); May Friedman and Shana L. Calixte, eds., *Mothering and Blogging* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2009); Gina Wong, ed., *Moms Gone Mad* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, forthcoming 2011); Michelle Moravec, ed., *Mothers Online: How Online Communities Shape Modern Motherhood* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, forthcoming 2011); and Maki Motapanyane and Shana L. Calixte, eds., *Mothering and Hip-Hop Culture* (Bradford ON: Demeter Press, forthcoming 2011). For a complete list of Demeter Press titles, see <http://www.demeterpress.org/>.

<sup>24</sup>Originally published in *Evocative Objects*, Sherry Turkle, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 184-193.

<sup>25</sup>Andrea Liss, *Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup>Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>27</sup>“Observations of a Mother” was originally published in Hirsch, ed., *The Familial Gaze*, 67-84. Gallop’s by now infamous book, which engaged with the writing of Lacan and various texts by French feminists, was published by Cornell University Press as *The Daughter’s Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1982) and by London Macmillan as *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter’s Seduction*. We thought it was fitting that Gallop’s article ends with Gallop’s daughter Ruby, who has so seduced her mother that Gallop includes Ruby’s image in spite of having no particular reason to do so.

<sup>28</sup>Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 14.

<sup>29</sup>Susan Suleiman first presented “Writing and Motherhood” at the MLA convention in San Francisco in December 1979, the first time she wrote (or even thought seriously) about motherhood in a personal way. The essay was first published in 1985, in a volume titled *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 352-377. E-mail to Myrel Chernick, September 9, 2009.



I.  
**Conversations and Questions**



## On Love, Politics and Fallen Shoes

Margaret Morgan in Conversation with Mary Kelly

MARGARET MORGAN: IN REEXAMINING YOUR work, I was struck by how important the maternal is to all of it, not just *Post-Partum Document*,<sup>1</sup> but also the work that is ostensibly far removed from the maternal. I was also struck by how varied the maternal's configuration is throughout. So that the *Document* seems the most intensely, and intimately, inward-looking, if you like, and at different points the work then expands outwards, as in the case of *Interim* (1984–89), or *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi* (2001), yet there's always this recurring relationship to the maternal. Do you agree?

MARY KELLY: Absolutely. The maternal is at the center of what I would call the critical inquiry. Kristeva suggests that one of the meanings of “revolt” is *a return*, in the psychoanalytic sense; you return to the past to engage in a process of self-reflection or self-criticism. And when I started working, which was in the wake of excitement produced by the “events of 1968,” I remember thinking—I was in art school at the time—that the idea of interrogating the object was inevitably leading to questions that went beyond this to the interrogation of the interrogation itself, and, well, I thought the other shoe would simply fall: subjectivity was going to be part of that project.

MM: So, if Joseph Kosuth and Terry Atkinson and other conceptual artists were at the time addressing the structures of art and language and the role of social and institutional contexts, it seemed self-evident, to you, that subjectivity, and the fundamental role of language in forming it, would be interrogated.

MK: Yes, but as it turned out, this wasn't evident in the art context at all. The questions of sexuality, identity, were informed mainly by the politics of the women's movement.

MM: It was ironic that the artists who were interrogating the interrogation, by addressing linguistic structure, were unable to “take the

next step,” if you like, in their own logic and look at the acquisition of language as integral to the mother-child dyad, which was the basis of the *Document*.

MK: In your opening remarks, you described the *Document* as being somehow less in the world than later works. I can see where that comes from, because you’re left historically with the physical forms, the material forms of the work, in which the autobiographical narrative is a central part of the signifying system. But I might think of that moment myself as being *more* in the world, you know, in the sense that the urgency of the question was immediately felt, as something imposed by a much broader context: *I was in it with other women, it was bigger than we were, and why hadn’t anyone thought about what this meant?* Most women had children and their lives were totally determined by it, but if you looked at art history, representations of the mother-child relationship were *always* from the point of view of an observer. Even with (Mary) Cassatt, you would *look* at the woman; it would be part of the *picture* of maternal femininity.

MM: Cassatt painted and drew portraits of women and children, though she herself was not a mother.

MK: There was no interrogation of that subjectivity, nothing that gave a voice to the woman as *subject*. So my interest in psychoanalysis really came from that political urgency, you know, from trying to find a discourse that had as its appropriate object something like feminine sexuality. I mean, the object of psychoanalysis is the unconscious, but you have no unconscious without sexuality. In *Post-Partum Document*, running parallel to the autobiographical narrative, there is always another kind of interrogation, one that is informed by what I call the “discursive site.” At that time, it was the debate about psychoanalysis in the women’s movement in London, where I was living then. So the esoteric reworkings or revisions of the Lacanian diagrams represent a moment when we were trying to describe what was being experienced here, in that symbiotic relationship with the child, and how the trauma of separation, once it was mapped onto the traditional schema of the subject unfolding in the field of the other—identification, castration, and so on—would reveal something unique about the way maternal femininity is formed. What is unique about maternal femininity?

MM: Can I ask what it meant for you personally? At that time?

MK: Well, it all hangs out. I mean, in the *Document* I didn’t exactly bury my subjective investment. I let the theoretical reworking run parallel to the diaries rather than explain or obscure them. Once my son said, when he read the *Document*, “That doesn’t sound like the mother that

I knew.” I guess there’s a lot of worrying in the narrative. “Did I get it right?” and “Oh, this school is absolutely horrible!” and “I haven’t got enough money to protect him from this.” Every parent knows you don’t tell the child that. You just say, “Trust me, everything will be all right,” even though you think it’s all going to fall apart the next day. So that fragile sense of being able to protect, control, or make the child “be what I want him to be” is always being negotiated. What it meant for me is obvious. You can read it in the diaries.

MM: Yes, I would like to touch upon this. You lived in a commune then, didn’t you?

MK: Yes, three other women and myself set up this household, and their partners, men included, could live there if they abided by the collective rules. You know, we thought the family was going to wither away like the state in those days! We shared the housework and, to some extent, childcare responsibilities. One of my friends had a child, and we would help each other, but those in the commune without children definitely didn’t pull their weight. And here was the most interesting discovery: I didn’t want them to anyway. Everyone was saying, “You have to wean him because we can’t help if you’re breastfeeding,” and “You can’t sleep all night unless he has a bottle”—this sort of thing. So I did wean him, but I think kind of prematurely, you know, after about four months, and then, I cried. But of course that helped me to understand there was more to it than the sociologically oriented tendency within the women’s movement had claimed (I mean those who thought it was just about demanding wages for housework). They argued that discrimination was an effect of the sexual division of labor, but the psychological dimension was missing. So the commune was important because it helped me to ask why, if someone else was willing to get up in the middle of the night, well, why didn’t I want him to? Why did I want to be the privileged other? What kind of pleasure was at stake here? Then, there it was in Lacan: the earliest moment of the mirror phase, which he describes in the developmental sense as an Imaginary captation. And I thought, yes, that’s exactly how it is for the mother, too. The world doesn’t seem real. Here I am trying to read the newspaper, but it makes no sense to me.

MM: In that period, especially before weaning from the breast, there is a palpable physiological link, an incredibly powerful force, in the mother-child dyad that seems almost to produce the mother as fragmented, broken up, *not herself*.

MK: Verging on a kind of psychosis.

MM: It is.

MK: Of course, that's where Freud first found the symptoms of the neuroses and psychoses: in everyday life. There's a very fine line here. You know, I didn't start *Post-Partum Document* until he was six months. I couldn't do anything before that.

MM: It's retrospective. Could you talk about that process?

MK: Well, with *Documentation I*, I took down what I was feeding him, as the doctors told me, but I made that more obsessive—every hour, every day for three months. Then it took me about two years after the event to look at it from a distance, to try to analyze it and give it a visual form. It was the same process for all six parts, and I didn't predict the ending. It was only in *Documentation VI*, when he wrote his name, that I felt I couldn't go on. I thought: he's the author of his own text now—a kind of superstition that to pursue this would be madness.

MM: For both parties.

MK: Not that your attachment to the child suddenly ends, but it's transformed, radically—more like watching at a distance.

MM: Yes, that's right.

MK: So this separation is, classically, I suppose, what you would call castration. The demand for which there is no object, you know, there's nothing you can specularize. Probably the most profound discovery, from a theoretical point of view, if I could claim anything like that, is found in *Documentation IV*, where I describe something like the *fort-da* game for the mother, that is, how she tries to conceptualize the child's absence. First, she hangs on—"you're still my baby"—then lets go—"you're so grown-up now." But, I asked myself, what is it that she's really afraid of losing, you could say, beyond the child's body? It seemed to be about the pleasure of being like her own mother. And more. There's an imagined closeness to the body of another woman that produces a kind of incestuous *jouissance*. Around this time, Montrelay published an article in which she proposed a concentric, or archaic, oral/anal organization of the drives as the woman's stake in symbolic castration and the condition for her access to sublimated pleasure.<sup>2</sup> This made a lot of sense, at the time, in terms of my understanding of maternal femininity, because it made a distinction between repression of the mother's body and a form of censorship in which she retains an anxious proximity to the first object. So I thought I was onto something.

MM: Formally speaking, what was the most difficult part of the *Documentation*?

MK: *Documentation V* was a hard one. He would bring me a snail and say, "Do you have a hole in your tummy?" I couldn't figure it out. What did they have to do with each other? Finally, I juxtaposed the questions



and the specimens with a kind of non-answer in the form of fragments of a diagram representing a full-term pregnancy and a list of medical terms. You know, Piaget says children always ask sexual questions first, and then they try to figure out the order of the universe. But what it meant in my universe, I guess, is that he was finding out that I didn't have the phallus; in other words, I wasn't this powerful person who could meet all his demands, and in fact, I probably was going to be *demoted* once he put me in the social order of things (laughter). And that did happen. You know, at school they asked him what his father did and he said, "He's an artist." But when they asked him what his mother did, he said, "I don't know."

MM: [laughter] Oh, that's fascinating.

MK: Then I started to think about the mother as the "Real Other," the unrepresentable supplement that breeds the *object a* as Lacan says. No one occupies this position, but it's the site of many projections. Say, if you go home to see your mother and she doesn't listen to *you* and talks about herself instead, you're so pissed off.

MM: Right, right. And, for many people, that's taken up by the therapist or the analyst.

MK: [laughter] I guess we all have to make our peace with the impossibility of forging a path back to the first object.

MM: So can you talk a little about your current experience of this maternal role—I mean, your son is a grown man—and if we can project a little bit, the role of your students in *Love Songs* (2005–07), the work you exhibited in *Documenta XII*. Do you think it represents, perhaps in displaced form, your relationship with the adult child?

MK: Certainly, the issue of generations is central to that work. I was archiving the recollections of women like me who were activists in the late sixties and comparing them with the comments of those like my students, my son, and you, of course, who were born around '68 and after. I started to notice their preoccupation with social movements of that time, what they seemed to know about it intuitively, what they thought they missed, and then I began to see the past more from the point of view of its construction in the present.

MM: A fictive past?

MK: Not exactly ... more like an imaginary investment in the political legacy. This provoked me to ask what, if anything, is passed on from one generation to the next after the *specific* demands of that moment have passed. I wouldn't describe this as nostalgia either. It's more like a form of intuitive knowledge based on words, gestures, or even silences in the family's interactions that the child somehow decodes as parental desire.



Mary Kelly, *Love Songs*, 2005–07. Installation, Neue Galerie, *Documenta XII*, Kassel.

There's the sexual mystery of conception, Freud's *primal scene*, which prompts the child's question: "Where did I come from?" I thought, in a similar way, this return to the sixties concerned a myth of origins in the social and historical sense, so I decided to call the psychic disposition that underlies it the *political primal scene*. As I went on in my work, I got more interested in the phylogenetic contents of the unconscious. After all, Freud said it was sometimes legitimate to consider the way the child fills in the gaps in his or her own experience with the events of "ancestors." Perhaps this is also what Benjamin had in mind when he referred to "a secret agreement between past generations and the present one."<sup>3</sup> But I'm not suggesting some notion of a collective unconscious here. You could say *Post-Partum Document* deals with the endogenous or developmental sense of the subject taking a place within the order of language and culture, and in later works like *Mea Culpa* [1999], and the *Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi* [2001], which deal with war and trauma, you see the impression of the past, I mean an exogenous system of meaning pre-existing the subject, what comes to you from the outside world. For instance, in one of the narratives of *Mea Culpa*, about Sarajevo, a mother asks, "What will we do?" And her son, who is only four, says, "Slit their throats." I thought, well, how does a child get this precise terminology at that age?

MM: Perhaps beliefs and attitudes a child gleans informally, are expressed in more extreme form by the child precisely because they are not subject to the usual taboos or constraints around expression as when, say, a parent actively teaches a child and in doing so also teaches the child the bounds of propriety, of either good manners or caution.

MK: That's true, and I recall Lacan pointing out that it's not so much what the parents actively teach or what they say that intrigues the child, but "Why are they telling me this?" I've collected a lot of things people have told me that illustrate the phantasmatic way we "fill in the gaps." For example, someone said, "My grandmother never held me when I was a baby, and I knew it was because my mother was Polish," and another, referring to orthodox Judaism, told me, "There were these books we weren't supposed to read as kids, but we all knew what was in them, anyway." But how? Not from *reading*, hardly even through gestures and innuendo, but something is *passed on*, probably as the enigma of the parental desire and, inevitably, as a scenario of failure because the Other is always found "lacking." Let's take, for example, the moment of '68: a young woman I was working with on the *Multi-Story House* project [2007] said, "I'm sorry that my parents weren't part of the German student movement, but now I'm trying to be more revolutionary."

So I wasn't only interested in how *this* generation constructed the past, but what that meant for mine.

MM: In constructing the future?

MK: No, no, in *my* return. This traces a path back to what I was initially saying about continual self-critique. When I return to the past, it's not that I go back there and say this was the greatest thing that ever happened, although I *would* say there's something really ecstatic about being with other women, a sense of...

MM: Possibility, agency.

MK: Yes, possibility *and* pleasure. But when I look back at this moment of euphoria in the present context, I have to ask myself how it's really that different from other fanatical or messianic experiences. It has many of the same features. So what was specific about feminism? When Rancière talks about becoming a political subject, he emphasizes the importance of a process called disidentification.<sup>4</sup> Let's just think of this as something like: "Okay, I'm no longer going to be the woman who stays at home or the worker who accepts those wages," and this process is followed by making a demand on behalf of all women, all workers. Some people have problems with this, but the best example I can give in the current context—because you can't *make* this happen, it depends on so many things—is that of Cindy Sheehan when she says, "I am not going to be a 'good mother' and accept my son's death in Iraq." And then, "*We*, as mothers, do not want our sons to go to war." So suddenly she becomes the center of the anti-war protest because she can make a demand on behalf of the Other. To get back to my question about feminism, I think there was something very specific about the way demands were formulated within the women's movement because there was an insistence on everyone having a voice and an aversion to hierarchical forms of organization. In this sense, it differed significantly from the usual tactics on the left.

MM: In the film loop, *WLM Demo Remix* [2005] that was shown in the *Love Songs* installation, I see the clearest evidence of this.

MK: Yes, the demonstration we were restaging took place in New York City in 1970. It was the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. When we were talking during the set-up—I think of this not only as a physical location, but also an emotional point that exists in the space between the original archival image and its technical reproduction—talking about the demands of the movement at that time, everyone agreed there was no way we could go out there and say, "Abortion on demand," right now. Who would we be representing? And we weren't going to say, "Free childcare for all," either. I mean, we couldn't imagine anything "free"

in this economy! But what does endure has much more to do with the transformative potential of that event—a certain relation to what you might call knowledge or truth.

MM: In the restaging?

MK: No, no, I mean, what's left. What's left of that moment in the women's movement is a legacy of personal transformation, which I call epistemological so that I can separate it from trauma and effects of the unconscious order. Here I'm thinking of Alain Badiou's concept of "event."<sup>5</sup> Something out of the ordinary "happens." You're aware of being changed by it, but don't know where it's going. In spite of this, you feel committed to the consequences, and that he calls "fidelity." Going back to the beginning of our talk, you remember I said that in the *Document* there was this commitment to a conceptualist notion of interrogation, but one informed by feminism, and that proposing subjectivity as the object of that inquiry was like letting the other shoe fall. Well, the shoes continued to fall—from maternal femininity to the question of masculinity and then, from war and trauma to resistance and political euphoria. But then I discovered that I had come full circle, so to speak, back to the origin of my project, and saw its trajectory as a certain kind of fidelity to the consequences of an event. The logic of that trajectory is really encapsulated in the famous slogan of May '68: "No right to speak without *les enquêtes*." So you could say what happens with *Love Songs* is like an interrogation of the etiology of my project, where all the earlier stuff came from, at least that's what it means for me.

MM: Oh, that's really interesting. So my sense of the *Document* being a very internal, inward-looking, intense thing is actually opened up. Could you say more here to connect with *Love Songs*?

MK: I tell my students, "I am not your mother, my love is conditional," [laughter] but secretly I absolutely adore them. And so there's a lot of transference going on here. My feelings towards the group of women I was working with on the remixes (*WLM Demo* and *Flashing Nipple* [2005]) was ... ah, intensely personal. You know, I brought some of my '70s clothes in for props and ended up giving my favorite jacket to one of them!

MM: That's hilarious. A literal sort of passing on of the mantle.

MK: Yes, that's right. And you know in the work how I—in the DVD, I changed the placard in the fade-out from "Unite for women's emancipation" to an obscure line from Sylvia Plath: "From stone to cloud."

MM: From "Love Letter"?

MK Yes, the last stanza goes:

Tree and stone glittered, without shadows.  
My finger-length grew lucent as glass.  
I started to bud like a March twig:  
An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg.  
From stone to cloud, so I ascended.  
Now I resemble a sort of god,  
Floating through the air in my soul-shift.  
Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift.<sup>6</sup>

MM: It is extraordinary. Is it elegiac for them or for you?

MK: In a way, for me, their coming of age as feminists is like a gift.

MM: Yes, yes, absolutely.

MK: I was also thinking about the pleasure, for women, of being together, both now and in the past, and wondering what kind of function this had in the realm of the political.

MM: You thought it was funny though, too: the show, the work, *Love Songs*.

MK: You're right. The humor *is* important in all the works, but especially in the drawings for the *Happening* [2008]. They made me laugh out loud when I was making them. But it's the kind of laughter that's sheer joy.

MM: Yes, yes. And it puts "love" smack-dab into the center of the political.

MK: You know, it's just ridiculous. But often, when you're in love it's like that. I mean, you can't stop smiling, and you feel like an idiot really.

MM: That's right, that's right.

—January 19, 2007

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* (London: Routledge, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>Michele Montrelay, "Inquiry into Femininity," *m/f* 1 (1978): 83-101.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1940), 390.

<sup>4</sup>Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum: 2004).

<sup>5</sup>Alain Badiou, "The Matheme of the Event," in *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006), 178-184.

<sup>6</sup>Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 129.

## Excerpts from *Post-Partum Document*

PPD 1976

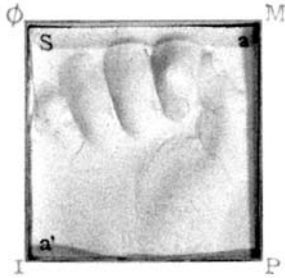
REF. I-8T

### Documentation IV Transitional objects, diary and diagram

In this document, 'transitional objects' refer to the child's comforter ('blankie') and to the plaster 'hand plaques' which constitute part of the mother's 'memorabilia' (reminiscent of baby's first photos, shoes, lock of hair, etc.). The clay imprints were initiated as an extension of the child's play activities at the nursery school between the age of 2.5-2.9. The diary texts, inscribed on the comforter fragments, were recorded at irregular intervals between January and May 1976. They functioned on the one hand as a confessional, expressing the mother's ambivalence about 'working outside the home,' and on the other, as a polemic, interrogating the familiar theme of 'separation anxiety' by placing emphasis on the consequences for the mother rather than the child.

The inclusion of Schema R within the discourse of Documentation IV summarises and, to a certain extent subverts, its use in Experimentum Mentis I-III. The diagram, which is stamped on the hand imprints, does not correspond literally to the diary texts in the sense of illustrating the subject's history. It unfolds as a representation of the static states of the subjects (S) within the fields of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real.

- (I) the Imaginary; including (a) the figure of the Imaginary other of the Mirror stage, (a') the paternal imago ( $\emptyset$ ) the Imaginary object, i.e., the phallus.
- (S) the Symbolic; including (M) the signifier of the primordial object (I) the Ideal of the ego (P) the Name-of-the-Father in the locus of the Other (A)
- (R) the Real; framed and maintained by the relations of the Imaginary and the Symbolic (the Real cannot be articulated but remains as a kind of residue of articulation, fore-closed to representation as such).



I didn't see K much  
this week because of  
the Brighton show.  
Now I've noticed he's  
started stuttering.  
Dr. Spock says it's  
due to 'mother's  
tenseness or father's  
discipline'. My work  
has been undermined  
by the appearance of  
this 'symptom' be-  
cause I realise it  
depends on belief in  
what I'm doing as a  
mother..... as well  
as an artist. I feel  
I can't carry on  
with it.

T327.2.76 AGE 2,6



### *Experimentum Mentis IV* *On femininity*

*At the Oedipal moment, the mother, father and child inhabit a closed field of desire. But for the mother, the distancing function of the father uncovers the source of narcissistic satisfaction which is sustained by her Imaginary object, the child as phallus. This is the pleasure of maternal femininity. The site of this excavation is precisely the corporeal reality of the child's body (the soft, round, perfectly formed body of her baby), because the pleasure she derives from it must be relinquished. This loss is pre-ordained on the one hand by the natural process of maturation, and, on the other, by the prohibitions of the Father and the Law. The Oedipal melodrama is staged as a maternal version of the Fort/Da game, 'How grown up you are' / 'You're still my baby,' or elided as in Documentation IV, T1, 'You're not a baby but a grown-up boy' (i.e., 'I wish you were still my baby but...').*

*This moment is decisive if her child is a boy since the prohibition to incest is insured by the threat of castration. However, the mother-daughter relationship is more ambivalent because the girl enters the Oedipal situation in retreat rather than in confrontation, in hope of receiving the phallus from her father, eventually in the form of a child. To achieve this end, she must identify herself with her own mother and take up a position of lack. This process of identification with the ideal type of her sex makes it possible for a woman to see herself as desirable, to enter into a sexual relationship with a man and to satisfy the needs of the child produced by this relationship; but it also introduces her to the pleasure of having the mother's body, cathecting her own body as that of her mother (or of another woman). Beyond the pleasure of the real of the child's body lies the pleasure of the maternal body experienced as real through it; the loss of this pleasure constitutes the ultimate threat to the mother's narcissism. Her 'memorabilia' and the child's 'transitional objects' are emblems which testify to the threatened loss of mutual enjoyment, but the desire in which they are grounded can only be caused in the unconscious by the specific structure of the phantasy.*

*When the mother anxiously poses the question, 'What do you want?(!)' in response to her child's whining, aggressive or clinging complaints, she is essentially asking herself, 'What does he/she want of me?' The child's demand constitutes the mother as the Other who has the privilege of*

*satisfying his/her needs and, at the same time, the whimsical power of depriving him/her of this satisfaction. To a certain extent the mother recognises the unconditional element of demand as a demand for love. It is this recognition which underlies her feeling of 'ultimate responsibility' for the child even when the sexual division of labour in childcare is radically altered to include the father.*

*But there is another cause for this asymmetry which is not necessarily given at the level of consciousness. This is the mother's desire to remain the privileged Other of the pre-Oedipal instance, in so far as the child's demands are the guarantee of her maternal femininity. Thus, she transforms the child's gifts into proofs of love and his/her indiscretions into denials. In this situation it is difficult for the child to locate his/her desire. Finally, it is the Law, of which the Father is the original representative, that intervenes to insure the autonomous status of desire; i.e., to substitute for the unconditional element in the demand for love, the absolute condition of desire. Paradoxically this implies a detachment which is the minimum condition for the Oedipal child's unsolicited expression, as in Documentation IV, T5, 'I love you, Mummy.' Through the child's words, 'the real' of the mother's body is represented as signifier of the real Other in the register of the Symbolic.*

PPD 1977–8

REF. 3.501x–4.515B

## Documentation VI

### Pre-writing alphabet, exerque and diary

The formative phase in which the child began to read and write was documented over a period of 18 months from January 1977 to April 1978. During this time (age 3.5–4.8) he started to identify certain letter shapes and map out a system of markings related to the traditional alphabet. Notations were made on his observations following ‘ABC sessions’ (i.e., reading from favourite alphabet books as part of the bed-time story repertoire), and the documentation was concluded when he began to write his own name. At the same time he entered infants’ school, an event which was equally significant for the mother because the learning process, once assumed to be a ‘private’ discourse, was then clearly seen to be determined by an institutional context.

This documentation is inscribed on slates and set out in chronological order. Each inscription is divided into three registers (analogous to the Rosetta Stone (with the Child’s ‘hieroglyphic’ letter-shapes (pre-writing alphabet) in the upper portion; the mother’s print-script commentary (exerque) in the middle section and her type-script narrative (diary) in the lower part.

#### *Alphabet*

The letter shapes deciphered in these inscriptions do not constitute a logical alphabet (there are 15 figures beginning with x and ending in B rather than 26 from A to Z); but they do demonstrate the child’s propensity to develop a system of graphic representation.

Pre-writing succeeds a mode of purposeful scribbling which already includes diagrammatic markings such as crosses and circles. At this moment the significant difference is that the child’s expressed intention in making these marks is *writing*. The x, called ‘a cross,’ ref. 3.501x constitutes a kind of universal grapheme class. It is virtually the functional equivalent of all letters, as the commentary indicates, ‘he substitutes different letter names for the same mark’; as yet, the child does not recognise the distinctive features which are necessary to distinguish one letter or grapheme class from another. In ref. 6.6020, the distinctive feature of o, curvedness, displays an optimal contrast with the straight lines (ascenders) of x. o is generally associated with anything round, but

at the same time it designates a more specific letter category than x in so far as when he writes o, he calls it ‘a round **and an o.**’ The development of a graphemic system follows from this initial opposition of marks, but it is ultimately dependent upon filling in the gaps between x and o. The first split occurs on the side of curvedness between the closedness of o and the openness of e, ref. 3.6030. At this point an extensive number of variations or graphs are included in the grapheme class e but together with x and o, they comprise a triangle defining the distinctive features closedness-openness on the horizontal axis and straightness-curvedness on the vertical axis.

x

o        e

In turn, straightness is distinguished by symmetry, x, versus asymmetry, r. The grapheme r, called ‘a hook,’ ref. 3.704r, also introduces curvedness into this category and by an extension of the ‘hook’ produces n and m. Next the ascender l is marked by the addition of a feature-i which he calls ‘a dot and an i,’ ref. 3.805i, and c, significantly unnamed, ref. 3.806c, is marked by the addition of ascenders and descenders b, d, p, q, ‘a round and a straight,’ ref. 3.908p, thus combining the distinctive features of both axes of the triangle.

Then capital letter configurations arise from combinations, additions or subtractions of ascenders; first placing an emphasis on the distinctive feature straightness as in E, F, ‘a straight one and another straight one,’ ref. 3.909E, and later introducing curvedness as in R, ref. 4.113R. This is followed by the letters K and B, ref. 4.414K–4.515B, which are constructed with the specific intention of writing his own name. By this time the child’s discrimination of distinctive features is adequate enough to categorise most letters of the alphabet and designate them by a spoken name. In addition, he recognises that letters such as E and e constitute alternatives for a single grapheme class and that although they have no distinctive features in common, they are equated when identifying a letter category in reading. The concept of reading also implies directionality; as is evidenced in ref. 4.515K, the child’s name is insistently printed from left to right, and significantly, previous inversions and reversals of letters such as ə q ɔ are corrected in this process. As a result his letters effectively represent the minimal contrasts necessary to distinguish a word in writing and at this moment his ‘writing’

articulates the letter as a material locus, a visual configuration, a concept and a category name.

### *Exerque*

The commentary and quotations set out below the child's inscription, identify the letter as material support of a concrete discourse. Within this space emphasis is placed on the intersubjective relations between mother and child in the act of reading and writing. Thus the gaps, omissions and inversions of the pre-writing alphabet are crucial for the mother in deciphering the child's text. His incipient agraphia—the provocative ə, ref. 3.603e, the unspoken ɔ, ref. 3.806c, the overstated E, ref. 4.012H, in so far as it is symptomatic of a resistance to the repression of Oedipal sexuality, implicates the mother and gives a place to her phantasies as well as those of the child. In this sense the intertextuality of alphabet and exerque efface the distinction between an object-letter and a subject who decipheres it. The hieroglyphic residue of the child's letter-shapes—the ideographic x, ref. 3.051x, the pictographic i, ref. 3.805i, the phonographic s, ref. 3.1111s—undermine a notion of the alphabet as absolute representation, i.e., as a system of arbitrary signs purged of all figurative regressions.

On the one hand, the repression, condensation and displacement of graphemic signifiers in the child's text suggest a writing anterior to speech, an insistence of the letter in the discourse of the unconscious which is resistant to signification as such. And on the other hand, the graphic rhetoric of children's books referred to in the mother's annotations to the child's script, such as A is for apple, B is for balloon, C is for cake, etc., implies a certain coagulation of the signified, underlining the logocentric bias of the system of language to which the letter ultimately subscribes; a system that privileges naming and the proper name and that pronounces the beginning of writing with the child's inscription of his father's name.

### *Diary*

The diary narrative inserts the intersubjective discourse of the letter into a complex of institutional practices and systems of representation which produce the social subordination of the mother. First, there is the representation of a specific socio-economic category. The diary events surrounding the child's entry into infants' school 'take place' in an urban, industrial, multi-racial, working-class area of the inner city often

designated as disadvantaged or 'deprived,' ref. 3.8060c. In sociological rhetoric, 'disadvantage' is constituted by a signifying chain of percentages concerning one-parent families, working mothers, low income, poor housing, inadequate transport, overcrowded schools, accidents, disease, pollution, illiteracy and crime. The place the mother occupies as an effect of the signifying chain is inevitably that of failure or at best a victim of circumstance; but the position she takes up in the process of representing this place to herself is by no means fixed as one of resignation; in ref. 3.704r, it is resistance, in ref. 3.908p, denial, in ref. 3.1111s, disassociation. Ultimately, it is not the mother's hopes, aspirations and ambitions for her child that are lacking, but the possibility of their realisation which is circumscribed by the economic constraints, social practices and political effects of separation from the means of production, possession and 'advantage.'

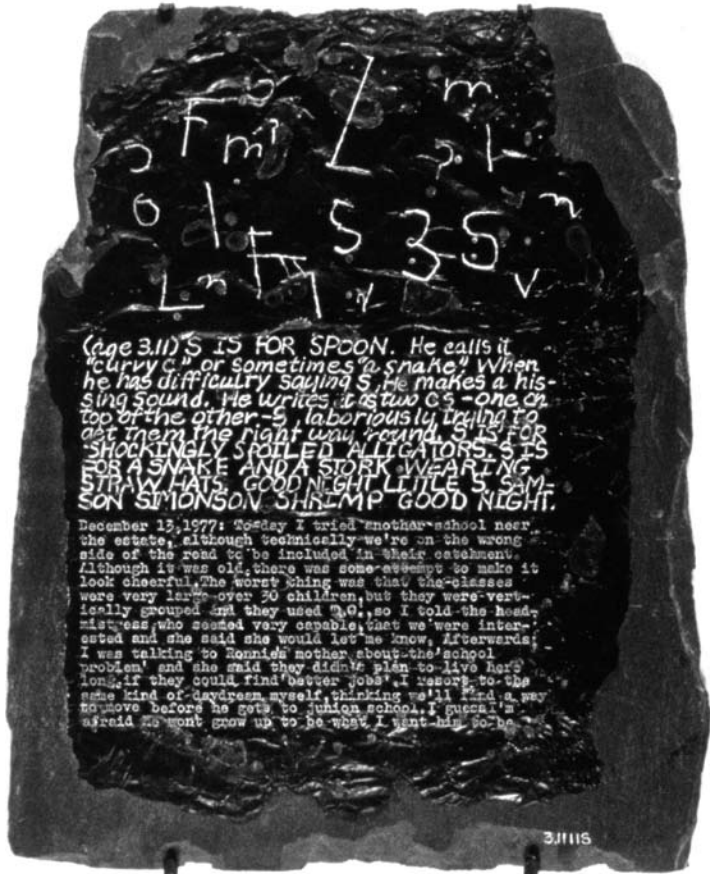
Second, there is the construction of the agency of the mother/housewife. In this position the mother is assigned certain responsibilities, moral attributes and legal statuses by the education authority. For instance, in ref. 4.414K, the form of address employed by the headmistress, i.e., 'Mrs,' at once confirms the parent's legal status as wife and her moral attribute as mother, implying the child's 'legitimacy.' It is to this agent/addressee that the school sends all memoranda concerning the dates of term, of holidays, the requirements for school outings, bazaars and benefits, the cost of school dinners, the rules and regulations concerning absenteeism, tardiness, fires, floods, the lending of library books, and the lending of a helping hand, such as supervising the playgroup, ref. 3.501x.

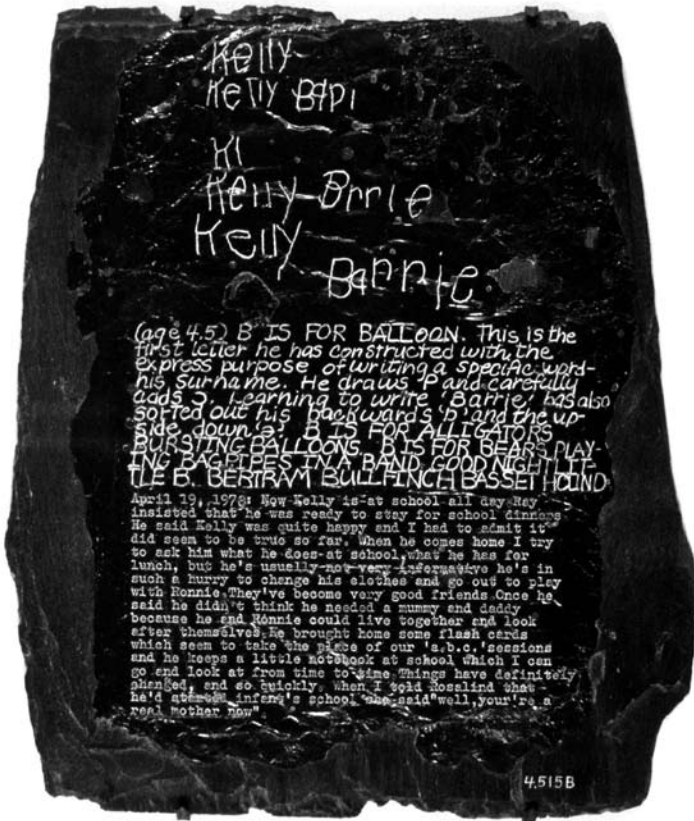
In addition the local health authority, in collaboration with the school, administer a medical service which consists primarily of monitoring the child's health (illnesses, immunisation, physical growth, mental progress and general social adjustment), and which designates the mother as guarantor of his well-being. This process of surveillance is epitomised by the yearly check-up, ref. 3.909E, and the mother's attendance is 'strongly advised.' Unavoidably the child's symptom is read as a sign of her capacity/incapacity to fulfill the agency of the mother/housewife at the level of the attributes deemed essential to that agency such as common sense, practicality and discipline mediated by an intimate, 'natural' bond with the child. However, the mother never sufficiently corresponds to the agency this institutional discourse defines and that is demonstrated by the father's participation in the realisation (also always partial) of those capacities, for instance when the mother is working, ref. 4.113R. Nor does the father ever conform to the agency of the father/husband fulfilling the function of the breadwinner or possessing a 'natural' aptitude

for authority, etc. On the one hand, there is often conflict between the husband and wife over responsibility for the child, ref. 4.414K, but on the other hand there is unmitigated deference shown by both parents towards the assumed authority of the headmistress/teacher in matters concerning childcare, ref. 3.807m. Thus the mother's secondary social status is not necessarily a result of the subordination of women by men, but rather it is an effect of the position occupied as the agent of childcare within the legal, moral, medical and pedagogic discourses of the educational institution. But there is a difference for the mother with respect to that position because these discourses also assign a place to the child which radically displaces her representation of him as part of herself. Consequently, the school becomes the site of a struggle for 'possession' of the child; it is a struggle the mother always loses and it is this sense of 'loss' which produces a specific form of subordination for the woman in her capacity as the mother/housewife.









*Experimentum Mentis VI*  
*On the insistence of the letter*

*Pre-writing emerges as post-script to the Oedipus complex and as preface to the moment of latency. In so far as the child's sexual researches are repressed by the Law and the Father, they are sublimated in the body of the letter; but it is the mother who first censors the look, who wipes the slate clean with her silence and prepares the site of inscription. For the mother, the child's text is a fetish object; it desires her. The polymorphous perversity of the letter explores the body beyond the limit of the look. The breast (e), the hook (r), the lack (c), the eye (i), the snake (s); forbidden anatomies, incestuous morphologies; the child's alphabet is an anagram of the maternal body. For the child the grapheme-as-body-in-the-position-of-the-signifier plays with difference, not the difference of the founding moment of castration, the ultimatum of being or having, but rather a re-play of differences and separations already sanctioned in the structuring and dissolution of the Oedipus complex. A cross (x), a round (o), an up and a down (n and m), a straight and a round (p, b, d, q): pairs of graphemic oppositions designate the symbolic function of presence and absence in a double movement of memory and forgetting. Faeces, mark, imprint, utterance; a residue of corporality subtends the letter and overflows the text. The gift unfolds the child's desire to-be-what-she-wants-him-to-be; but the letter constructs the cannot-be of his autonomy and instigates the unexpected pleasure of deferment.*

*With the inscription of his proper name, the child is instituted as the author of his text. Each purposeful stroke disfigures the anagram, dismembers the body. The mother is dispossessed of the phallic attributes of the pre-Oedipal instance, but only as if re-tracing a vague figure of repletion on a distant screen. Fading, forgetting; she cannot remember although 'it seems like only yesterday.' This wound to her narcissism is now a caricature: a tearful bliss, a simulated ecstasy, a veritable stigmata in the Name-of-the-Father. With the child's insistent repetition of the Name, he appropriates the status of the Father, the dead Father, the absent Father, the pre-condition of the 'word.' The incestuous meaning of the letter is ciphered by the paternal metaphor. But at the same time this introduces the possibility of 'truth,' the*

*truth of the mother; that is, the fiction of the 'real mother,' not the Madonna, but the Pietà, dispelling imputations of guilt with patience, self-sacrifice, long-suffering and resignation. Resignation punctuated with protests: 'he is too little ... he is too young ... they are too rough ... it's too far.' In phantasy, the mother endures an endless series of threats to the child's well-being; sickness, accident, death. Her castration fears take the form of losing her loved objects, primarily her children; but underlying this is the fear of losing love, that is, the fear of being unable to reconstitute her narcissistic aim, of being unable to see herself as infinitely good and unconditionally loved. Ultimately, it is the fear of her mother's death and her own death as the imaginary stake in the representation of that loss. This negation is constituted by a recognition of unbearable dependence; but it is also an affirmation of life since the child's independence is implicated in the renunciation he imposes on her desire.*

*The effects of repressing Oedipal pleasure for both the mother and the child are evaded through sublimation, that is, through their mutual inscription in an order of extra-familial discourse and social practice. But the very movement towards a non-parental ideal that prompts the child's creative initiatives or indiscretions and constructs the representation of his social place, returns the mother to the site of the family, to the parental ideal of her own mother and to the representation of maternal femininity. Such a circuitous passage is problematic; being the phallus, she cannot have it; not having it, she cannot represent herself as an object of desire. She finds it difficult to assume responsibility for her pleasure without guilt; to provoke her sexual partner, to slight her child. Fearing failure, she is distracted from the projects which interest her most. There is a reprieve; another child, the fullness of the dyad, the sweetness of that imaginary encapsulation which reduces the 'outside world' to absurdity. But there is also the inevitable moment of separation reiterating a lack always already inscribed and impossible to efface. She asks herself, 'What will I do ... when he starts school ... when he grows up ... when he leaves home ... when he leaves me...?' This moment signifies more than separation; it articulates a rupture, a rent, a gap and a confrontation—a confrontation not only because of the way in which her desire, as desire of the child, to-be-what-she-wants-him-to-be, is produced within a field of social and economic constraints; but also because of the way in which the dialectic of desire, the movement of subject and object with its insistence on bisexuality, continually transgresses the system of representation in which it is founded. The*

*construction of femininity as essentially natural and maternal is never finally fixed but forever unsettled in the process of articulating her difference, her loss. And it is precisely at such moments, that it is possible to desire to speak and to dare to change.*

Excerpts from *Post-Partum Document*

- |                  |   |      |
|------------------|---|------|
| Documentation IV | Transitional objects and diary, 1976          | 1-3  |
|                  | 1 unit 29.78 x 35.6 cm mixed media            |      |
| Documentation VI | Pre-writing alphabet, exerque and diary, 1978 | 4-15 |
|                  | 3 units 20.3 x 25/.4 cm resin and slate       |      |

## Ruth Skilbeck in Conversation with Mary Kelly and Kelly Barrie

IN 2008 MARY KELLY AND HER SON, Kelly Barrie, created a collaborative installation for the Sydney Biennale. In the following excerpt from a conversation with Ruth Skilbeck at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, they discuss their personal and artistic relationship.

RUTH SKILBECK: I have some questions I'd like to ask you about your practice as artists, mother and son, working together and separately. I'm interested in the ideas in your work, in your creative processes, your methodologies, how these intersect with your lives and are articulated in your collaborative installation at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, at the Sydney Biennale: Mary's Super 8 film, *Antepartum*, made in 1973, and Kelly's video-recording *Astral Fields*, made 35 years later in 2008. So, how long have you been collaborating as artists?

MARY KELLY: Well, consciously we haven't been collaborating at all! But of course we had collaborated on one of my first and perhaps most well-known works, *Post-Partum Document*, in the '70s. Carolyn [Christov-Bakargiev] thought that it would be interesting to return to the work now with Kelly being an artist and for him to respond to it. At first we thought, well that's a little weird—can we do it right? But then it generated a lot of really interesting conversations, and Kelly actually came up with the installation plan, juxtaposing an animated version of one of his still photographs from the *Astral Fields* series with my film loop, *Antepartum*, so that the kind of rhythm of the child's movements was synchronized with the actions in his projected image. I thought it was really interesting and wanted to go ahead with the project. [To Kelly] What would you say?

KELLY BARRIE: When I was looking at both images together on the smaller scale of the computer screen, the aspect of Mary's work that I wanted to respond to directly was the sort of live action of the movements

within the womb which appear as intermittent bumps on the surface of a sphere. At the same time, I wanted to retain a strong presence of my own practice within that, so taking a still per se and animating it was one way to reactivate that space with Mary's. Because the image itself, the photograph, is formed from multiple exposures laid on top of each other, the video is reanimating it even further by reactivating these layers and allowing them to mesh and fragment and spin and twist and engage in these moments of synchronicity with Mary's piece—where there would be a movement internally in the belly, and it would correspond in certain ways with my piece.

RS: Mary, could you talk a little about *Post-Partum Document* and the context in which it was made, in terms of the context of your life, and, more widely, in terms of the social context of the time?

MK: Well, when I started *Post-Partum Document* it was at the high point of the social movements of the late '60s and particularly the women's movement. I brought it into my own procedures in terms of the work itself and embarked on this project-based, art-as-life thing. I didn't know when it was going to end, but when I started out I thought it would be clear that it had come out of conceptualism, but it just ended up making everybody uneasy [laughs]. The critics and theorists said, well, they liked the theory but why did it have to have that "stuff" like the, you know, so-called dirty nappies [laughs], and the feminists said, oh, well, we like the narratives and the "stuff," but why do you have to have the theory? So on every front it seemed to be confrontational at the time. Although perhaps I can't completely take credit for consciously causing a scandal at the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art in London] in 1976, when I look back on it, the way that that moment in history came together with my practice as an artist, I would say something of a breakthrough took place then in terms of gender and the way that art could no longer be viewed as perfectly neutral. When I came to Sydney in 1982—this was the Biennale Bill Wright directed and he included the entire *Post-Partum Document*—it marked an historic moment here for identity politics in the art world. All the debates about identity and difference were very much debated at that time—you know, it was a hot topic. So that was the context for PPD, which carried on from 1973 until '79. When Kelly wrote his name, I always say that was the end [laughs], because it was something like, he's the author of his own text now, and I'd better not go further than that. And I never had any intention of doing anything with him again [laughs]—going to keep my distance—so this was an interesting way to come back and reconsider certain things, a personal as well as political history.

RS: That's interesting about the writing of the name. That's the Lacanian idea of the individual subject emerging through entering into the symbolic order of language?

MK: That's right.

KB: Yes, and in a way some of my practice is at least engaged photographically in these subject relations in terms of the camera specifically having such a powerful presence when it's just documenting and recording things, and I was consciously aware of the dilemma of that subject-object position. So it was very natural for me to make myself the subject of my own gaze in that sense, because I only felt comfortable producing that examination or conducting that experiment on myself, so to speak. By occupying both positions, I was able to sort of examine those relationships, especially in the format of the still and in terms of doing these sorts of very basic gestures of making hand casts and documenting this almost pre-verbal utterance—you know, this sort of action—that was in the process of becoming. I also made a series of photographs before in which I used my own saliva, ejecting it into space, and some of them have a direct relationship as sort of archaic precedents to a self-portrait. I'm taking the pictures blindly, spitting out towards the camera and essentially over time building up this perceived pattern of saliva that's evacuated of all materiality because it becomes translucent as the light passes through it.

MK: We were talking about the way Julia Kristeva describes the child's earliest relationship with the mother as introjection and projection, something prior to full identification. Well, Kelly and I were joking about spitting out the mother [laughs], in a sense. And then as we thought more about those psychic processes it seemed like spitting was an obvious projection, which in your image expands to suggest an infinite universe, and then in mine there's introjection of the child in terms of the symbiotic relation to the mother's body and in the imaginary space of maternal identity. But when we thought about it again things reversed, right? And how did it go? We were saying that there's projection on the side of my piece and then introjection on the side of yours....

KB: That articulation—when you move your hands—it's very much about the surface, yet for me there's a projection past the surface into an interior, so in a way it is a reversal, an externalized interiority. That's also what I'm dealing with in the image of my literal video projection: a sort of imagined space. I try to draw out this idea of interior space, and the idea of blindness and the idea of not being able to actually reach that vanishing point—you know, what's real for whom—so then, what's imagined is just as poignant for me in terms of trying to articulate that space.



RS: And it relates to Julia Kristeva's notion of the pre-linguistic "chora"?

KB: Yes, very much so, absolutely.

MK: This is interesting for me too, because I'm known as a text-based artist and my piece does not have any words, but of course it has gestures which are semiotically loaded [laughs], and the "chora"—Kristeva's realm of rhythms and intonations anterior to the phoneme—is further evoked in Kelly's photographic manipulations. Would you go with that?

KB: What's fascinating for me about the photographic process is that the performance of casting and dispersing the hand imprints in flour is based on an impulsive, repetitive act, the goal being to capture that one still moment where the sculpture has been frozen in time and remains intact, but of course that's absolutely impossible, it's constantly failing. The photograph is made up of mutant waves of refracted light, which give it an odd structure, commonly seen as a mistake in technical photographic practice. So it becomes not only about how light transforms these fragile, would-be sculptures in mid-air, but also about their inevitable failure because they collapse and disintegrate and fracture and transform into other sorts of bodies. They all exist on the same plane, so to speak, so they are all competing with each other equally, I mean they're all in that together...

MK: ...in a space of "psycho-graphic equilibrium." Kristeva talks about this in an article on Giotto, I think, something to do with the way color, or in your case light, inscribes instinctual residues that disturb that balance because they're difficult to symbolize. Of course the photographic processes you use are so complex compared with those in the '70s when I made my film, originally in Super 8, later transferred to DVD. It was shot in real time, only 90 seconds, but has a sense of infinite duration. Very little happens in it, just one gesture, which is repeated in an endless loop. When it was shown in the context of work from that period, though, you could see how the bottom-line simplicity of my minimal form, or receptacle—the meaning of "chora" in Greek and, according to Plato, the mother of all things—produces a kind of humor in relation to something like, say, Tony Smith's *Black Box*. In one sense there's a return to the past as one meaning of revolution in this exhibition, which is quite obviously historical. And I thought this touched on what was really at stake in my work and why it goes beyond the exhibition to invoke an almost existential sense of return to the past, I mean everyone's wish to return to that impossible place—that unmediated relation to the mother.

RS: It's a simple image, a very profound image: a minimal close-up of the circular abdomen at full term, caressed by the maternal hands.

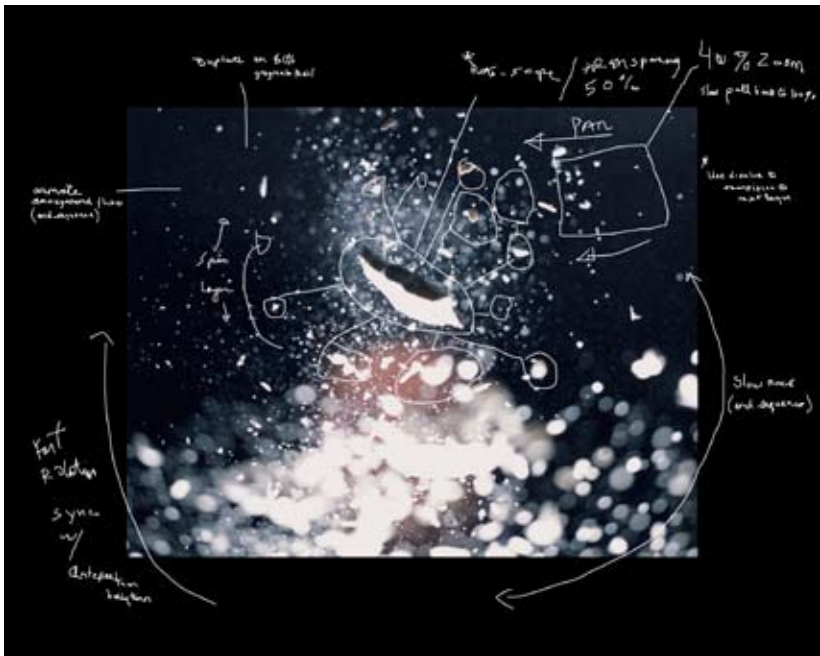
KB: That was one of the prime things in terms of the installation. It was quite an elaborate, more complicated spatial arrangement initially, and I think it became problematic, and there was a kind of a reversal again in terms of deconstructing it and bringing the two projections back down to their raw, minimal base. This became more poignant as we went on with the project, as we realized that the images were so loaded that it would make more sense to allow the beams to simply cross over through each other and exist as these two positions within one installation.

MK: I think that was brought out by the curatorial overview too, because there's an emphasis on simplicity, anti-spectacle in a way, which we appreciated when we had to work within that directive. And I do understand that it's not necessarily a valorization of the maternal, but I feel there was something anti-phallogocentric as a whole, a certain kind of interrogation that you don't usually see in large international theme shows and places like the art fairs.

RS: Is this the first time this has been shown?

MK: My film has been shown many times before, but the collaboration with Kelly makes it a new work.

—*Sydney, Australia, June 20, 2008*



Kelly Barrie, *Sketch for Astral Fields* video, 2008. Archival inkjet print, 13 × 19 inches.

SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN AND MYREL CHERNICK

## “Good Enough Mothers”

Myrel Chernick in Conversation with Susan Rubin Suleiman

SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN IS THE C. Douglas Dillon Professor of the Civilization of France and Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard University. Among her extensive writing on literature and art, she has published several important essays that address maternal subjectivity, including “Writing and Motherhood” and “Maternal Splitting” (reprinted in “Conflicts of a Mother,” *Risking Who One Is*, Part One)<sup>1</sup> and “Playing and Motherhood” (adapted from “Feminist Intertextuality and the Laugh of the Mother,” *Subversive Intent*, Chapter Seven).<sup>2</sup>

When I first encountered *Subversive Intent* as an artist and mother of young children struggling with multiple professional identities and the demands of my family, it was a revelation for me to read about maternal subjectivity in a scholarly work devoted to contemporary literary theory and art criticism. There I found many affinities to my own life and work that became even more apparent in Suleiman’s subsequent book *Risking Who One Is*, which interweaves her personal and professional lives and begins to relate her history as a child born at the beginning of World War II in Hungary. In Suleiman’s most personal work, *Budapest Diary*, recounting her return to Budapest for the first time since she fled as a child thirty-five years earlier, she begins to examine her past with the kind of intensity and deep analysis that she brings to her theoretical writing. In her more recent work, she explores the terrain of memory and the Holocaust.

In 1995, as a response to questions on recent feminist theory and practice and “elitism vs. accessibility” (in a forum in *October 71*, *feminist issueS*, edited by Silvia Kolbowski and Mignon Nixon), Susan Rubin Suleiman wrote: “Personally ... my critical trajectory since the early 1980s has been toward greater accessibility. But this has less to do with thoughts ... about theory than with thoughts about language and about audience. I have felt an increasing need, or desire, or longing, to be read

by more than a few people.... It is ... a matter of speaking in a common language. So yes, there has been a refusal in my work: I would call it a refusal of, even a revulsion against, the excesses of metalanguage.”<sup>3</sup> This ability to connect is reflected in Suleiman’s style, in the quality of her writing, and in the mingling of the theoretical and the lived experience in her work. As I have always been interested in the story behind the story, I have appreciated a style of feminist writing, perhaps inspired by that original tenet of “the personal is the political” that interweaves theory and anecdote, and which contributed to my original attraction to Suleiman’s work. In these excerpts from our informal conversation in January 2006, she describes some of the formative experiences that produced the intrepid scholar and writer.

MYREL CHERNICK: One of the things I found interesting when I first inquired about your essay “Writing and Motherhood”<sup>4</sup> for our book, *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, was that you asked if it was still relevant. I actually wish it were less relevant, but in observing the situation that exists for mothers today, I find the exhibit *Maternal Metaphors* still relevant, as well as the questions women ask themselves.

SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN: Is it because our society hasn’t gotten any better or because this is a permanent structural feature of the human psyche or the maternal psyche?

MC: That’s an important question, and I believe that the answer is “both.” In some ways I do think the society’s gotten worse.

SRS: I agree with that.

MC: Especially when you read about these women now deciding to abandon their careers completely...

SRS: After getting a law degree at Harvard.

MC: And that decision is celebrated in an article on the front page of the *New York Times*.<sup>5</sup>

SRS: In one of my other essays, “Maternal Splitting,”<sup>6</sup> which has to do with the mother thinking of herself as somehow guilty, or torn between conflicting demands (I guess even in “Writing and Motherhood” I was talking about that), I argued that if the society were more supportive of mothers by providing really top-notch childcare, and by generally making it easier for a woman to move in and out of mothering and careering or to have support while she was a mother, so that she could also satisfy her other commitments, then some of that ambivalence would disappear or at least be lessened. But obviously things have not gotten better in that respect since the 1980s.

MC: I don’t believe we’ve had a chance to test that theory, because the

kind of help and childcare you're talking about is not there in the United States, other than for very wealthy women. What about France, where they have better childcare?

SRS: I think in France there is generally less pressure. In the United States, one of the reasons that mothers have terribly torn feelings is that they are sent a message by the culture that a good mother is always there with cookies and milk when the child comes home from school, and a good mother doesn't have any other interests besides her child or her family. That's still a very powerful message. In France, first of all they have a very good childcare system, but also for centuries women have sent their babies off to wet nurses, or to their own mothers to be taken care of—many kids have grown up with their grandmothers. Mind you, I'm not advocating this as a solution; I think children should grow up with their parents, if at all possible. But it shows that the societal expectation in France is generally less stringent about what a "good" mother does. The paradox is that in the United States, despite this sort of Perfect Mommy image we also have the most appalling degree of child abuse. I haven't read of things like this in France—the number of children who get killed every year by their parents is just mind-boggling. Violence against children exists in Europe too, that's undeniable, but the numbers are not comparable at all. It's a truly exceptional event for a child to be killed there, whereas it's all too depressingly frequent in the United States. So there's a strange thing: on the one hand we're told you have to sacrifice yourself completely to your child, and on the other hand we tolerate, literally tolerate, children being beaten to death by their parents. Clearly things are not getting any better.

MC: That says something about the structure of American society, where the government won't provide programs to help mothers cope—and that makes the contradiction greater. You feel worse if you're not a conventionally good mother because there's no tolerance of the less-than-perfect mother in the popular culture.

SRS: Or even of the "good enough" mother, as D.W. Winnicott called her. There is an ideal out there, which real mothers, as you put it in your title, are constantly having to measure themselves against. To get back to Europe for a minute, there's maybe less of that ideal image there, and therefore real mothers don't have to be beating themselves on the head so much for being just good enough.

MC: I would like to lead in with that to your early experience with Europe. I wanted you to talk about your life because I think your trajectory is relevant to all your interests and the variety of work that you write about.

SRS: I was born in Hungary, a month before the outbreak of World War II into a Jewish Hungarian family. That means that technically I am a child survivor of the Holocaust, although I don't particularly love that label. Like many other Jewish children who survived the war in Europe without being taken to concentration camps, I haven't thought of myself as “a Holocaust survivor.” But technically, this relatively new term of “child survivor” does apply to me, so what does that mean? It means that some of my earliest memories have to do with being scared. Hungary was on the side of the Germans in World War II, entering the war in 1941. Paradoxically, that meant that Hungarian Jews were somewhat less threatened in the beginning than Jews in Poland or in occupied Europe.

Even though Jews were doing well, relatively speaking, until 1944, Jewish men were being drafted into forced labor service. The mass deportations of Jews didn't begin until the spring of 1944, when the Germans invaded Hungary. Of course the Hungarian government cooperated fully. They cleared out the Jews from the provinces, and then turned to Budapest. But luckily, meanwhile the Allies landed in Normandy, and the Hungarian leader Horthy stopped the deportations in mid-July—too bad the idea didn't occur to him earlier, before 400,000 Jews were shipped to Auschwitz.

My first memories date from the spring of 1944 when the Germans occupied Hungary. I was not yet five years old, and this sort of panic was all around me. It certainly must have influenced me, but I was among the very lucky ones, I guess. The other main event during that time was that my parents, like many other Jews in various countries, thought they would keep me safe by taking me to a farm and leaving me there by myself with people I didn't know. That was traumatic, for a child so young. After a while they came back to get me, and my mother always claimed they didn't leave me there for long. But it was long enough to be imprinted in my memory, and it's an event I keep coming back to when I think about my childhood. After the farm I was with my parents in Budapest, and we spent that winter hiding with false papers, pretending to be Christians. That was pretty scary too, but at least we were together and we survived, that's why I say I'm lucky. Then after the war, things were really good for a few years. I started school in September 1945, and it felt like a normal childhood despite all the enormous losses—both my parents' extended families were almost entirely wiped out. In '48 the Hungarian Communist Party came to power and stopped emigration. My family had to do what many other families did in 1949: walk across the border illegally, into Austria. We spent eight months in Vienna, then

started moving west. We spent a few weeks in Paris, then boarded a ship in Le Havre and ended up in Haiti.

MC: Where did you stay in all these places? How did your family survive?

SRS: Interesting question. We got to Vienna in August 1949, and we certainly didn't have much, no more than a suitcase or two. But I think my father had brought out some money with him. Somehow or other we managed, like all the other refugees at the time who were in Vienna. Vienna at that time was divided into four sectors: the American, the French, the British and the Russian. We rented half of an apartment from a widow who was living there. I remember my parents had a whole circle of friends, other refugees from Hungary, with whom we went on Sunday hikes. It was a kind of artificial existence, since everyone was on their way somewhere else, using Vienna as a way station. Then in Paris we were already on our way to Haiti, and we stayed in the apartment of an aunt of mine, who had emigrated to France in the 1930s with her husband and daughter.

And then we were really on our way. We were again among the lucky ones because my mother had a younger brother, my uncle Nick, who was the fabled *oncle d'Amérique*, the American uncle who had left Europe as a young man and made his fortune. He had a factory in Haiti and he said, "Come and spend time in Haiti, and from there you can see about entering the U.S. or Canada." The other alternative would have been to go to a displaced persons camp in Europe, and my parents considered it for a while, but then when he came up with this offer they realized it would be much better not to be in a displaced persons camp. We spent six months in Haiti, and then got visas for the United States—my sister was born prematurely in Haiti, so the first thing we did when we entered the States was to spend a few weeks in Miami while she grew. She was in an incubator, and we'd visit her every day.

MC: How did this affect your education? How much was the total time?

SRS: We left Hungary in August 1949, and we entered the United States at the end of December 1950, so the whole trip was about 15 or 16 months, of which eight were spent in Vienna, and I went to a French school there. I had already started to learn French in Budapest, then did the school in Vienna, and in Haiti I went to a French school too, run by *les bonnes soeurs*, the nuns of Saint Rose of Lima. The French education system was fabled for its strictness, and I certainly learned grammar and arithmetic very well. It also added another layer to my identity. Having had to pretend to be Catholic at age five for several months and then



going to school with the nuns in Haiti, all that produced a certain vacillation, especially considering that my father was trained as a rabbi and we kept kosher, even in Haiti! It was not clear to me exactly who or what I was, or who I wanted to be.

MC: I can imagine that the entire experience, moving around that way, was difficult for a child of your age, although you were with your parents.

SRS: Right, I was with my parents, and so throughout that time it was a kind of alternation between feeling very disoriented and feeling that I was living a great adventure. You know, I remember in a strange way turning the whole war experience into an adventure tale: having to pretend to be a little Christian girl whose name was Mary, and we couldn't say who we were. Hitler was a monster and we were trying to protect ourselves from him, and we must sing “Holy Night” at Christmas. One of the first pieces of autobiography I wrote many years later was a short piece titled “My War in Four Episodes,” where I describe that adventure. I especially remember going out at night with my parents and the other people we lived with to collect snow, around December 1944, so that we would have water to drink—I described it as an almost magical moment, though it must have been frightening too. I began to tell this story when I was about seven or eight to anybody who would listen, and later there was the story of leaving Hungary. I had two adventures, the war and leaving Hungary on foot. So on the one hand there was disorientation and fear, and on the other a kind of swagger: Hey, we were able to do this, we are invincible, or at least we have managed to live through this adventure and tell about it, live to tell the tale.

MC: Did you stay in New York very long?

SRS: About two and a half years—we arrived there in January 1951. My father got a job as a rabbi in a summer community, which was very nice for us. For two summers we went up to the Catskills, but still, during the year what was he going to do? Eventually he got a job in Chicago, which was why we moved to Chicago.

MC: How old were you at that point?

SRS: I was just about to turn 14. We moved to Chicago in the summer of '53, less than three years after we arrived in New York. They had put me into sixth grade when I first got there: I knew not a word of English, you realize, but with all my training from the *bonnes soeurs* I was really good in math. The other thing that helped me was that I discovered the public library, and I just read voraciously. I also loved comic books, *Little Lulu* and *Archie* and all those comics, that's how I learned English. After a few months in school they did some kind of testing—this was the

New York City public schools—and I guess I was able to perform on this test, which made the powers that be decide that I should be in a special class. They had a system where you did seven special-nine special, so you skipped a grade in middle school, and that was great because I was in this special class with other girls; it was an all-girls' school.

They gave us the test in the spring of '51, and in the fall I went to a junior high school on York Avenue and 81<sup>st</sup> Street—it no longer exists. We lived on 83<sup>rd</sup> and York, and for two years I was in the special class with other “smart girls.” I became part of a little circle of very good friends which included a girl who lived on Central Park West and whose mother was an art critic for the *New York Times*. I'll never forget the apartment they had overlooking the park, full of modern art. And then there was another girl who was Jewish too, who lived on York Avenue—both of these women got in touch with me in later years because of *Budapest Diary*, and they're still living in New York. There was another girl in our group who was Puerto Rican, Lila Rodriguez. We had meetings every week at Connie the rich girl's apartment on Central Park West. In those days a girl like Constance was going to public school. Nowadays that would just not be possible; a girl whose parents are an investment banker and an art critic for the *New York Times* simply would never meet a girl like Lila Rodriguez or me unless we were scholarship students in some private school. So I was really happy. And I remember that the teachers in this junior high school were just marvelous women. One was our social studies teacher, or maybe she did social studies and English—she was the least good, but I liked her. Our science teacher was a really dedicated, hard-as-nails woman—it was unbelievable how good she was. She would have those of us who were her little favorites, or who wanted to be, stay over during lunch hour and share her Wheat Thins, talking about science. Then there was our math teacher, Miss Crowley, who drilled us like crazy because we all had to get into either Bronx High School of Science or Hunter High School; those were our two choices. I was admitted to both schools, it was marvelous, and because of the influence of that science teacher I decided to go to Bronx Science. But, disaster, that was the summer of 1953, when my father got his job in Chicago. My mother said, “We're driving to Chicago” and we drove to Chicago. I went off to Barnard in the fall of 1956, and that was the beginning of my brilliant career! [laughter]

MC: And it has been, too. When did you get interested in French again?

SRS: I was taking French in high school, and I also got very involved in the school paper and was seriously considering doing journalism. When I

got to Barnard, since I was very good in chemistry, I became a chemistry major—this was still the influence of my science teacher from junior high school, and Barnard had a wonderful woman chemistry teacher as well, Helen Downing. But I still kept up my French, took one or two French literature courses. I was very interested in literature, yet somehow felt that I should study chemistry. I guess this had to do with my identity question, not knowing whether I was a scientist or a humanist. But in my second semester of junior year I took a literature course with a visiting professor from England. These strong women, now that I think of it, have certainly played a role in my intellectual evolution. Her name was Elizabeth Wilkinson, she was a professor of German literature, and she was the first Gildersleeve Visiting Professor at Barnard, so there was big excitement when she got there. She gave a course on the Faust myth in literature, and I was just totally enthralled by this course and by her way of teaching, which somehow assumed that we were all mature thinkers and lovers of ideas—although in fact we were just young women muddling along. I remember very clearly: it was after writing a paper on Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* that I decided to switch my major and become a literature major. In the end I didn’t formally switch, but the rest of my courses that year were all in English and French literature, and I again had a number of teachers who were wonderful women and who encouraged me tremendously, including one who was Dean of the Faculty as well as a French professor. She was great, she kept telling me, “You need to apply for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to go to graduate school.” After graduation I was given a small traveling scholarship by Barnard, and my dear uncle Nick gave me a present: a monthly allowance in Paris for a year, which changed my life. After that, I did get a Woodrow Fellowship and came to Harvard to do graduate work.

MC: What was the year like for you in Paris?

SRS: I had dreams of being a writer. I had published a poem in the Barnard literary journal, and had started to write fiction. The poem was okay but the fiction wasn’t going very far. Again I was trying to live an adventure, the Paris adventure, reading *Tropic of Cancer* and sitting in smoke-filled cafes. For the first month and a half I stayed in a hotel in Montparnasse, on the rue Delambre, which was a total fleabag as well as maybe an *hotel de passe*, where prostitutes came with their clients, but it was all I could afford.

And soon after that, when it turned cold and dark and the hotel had only 40-watt bulbs and no heat, I realized that I should give up leading the bohemian life and try to do something a little more reasonable. So I applied for a room at the Pavillon des Etats Unis at the Cité Universi-

taire in November, and the rest of the year I lived there. I was there in the spring of 1961 when a bomb went off; this was during the height of the Algerian war.

MC: I wanted to bring the conversation to when you began to write about motherhood. I believe that there is a relationship between your life, which formed the basis for your intellectual drive, and your broad interests that range from literary theory to Surrealism, to artists writing about motherhood, to your personal writing, and to your more recent work about memory and the Holocaust. I find it a fascinating story, particularly your account of the women who encouraged you.

SRS: Actually I'm finding this quite fascinating too, in some ways, because I want to do more personal writing and was wondering what to write about. In that piece about my mother's silver pin<sup>7</sup> [reprinted here], the focus was more on the United States, the experience of being immigrants in the United States. I think I should emphasize that now, rather than the Budapest years. Even though *Budapest Diary* does not systematically talk about my childhood in Budapest, in a way that is the book about "over there." If I want to write another book, it has to be more about "there and here."

MC: I found myself wanting to fill in the gaps, when I was reading that book, because at a certain point your academic and theoretical writing comes to the fore, although you have a way of integrating your life into your writing even in *Subversive Intent*, where you let us know in the introduction that you're a mother.<sup>8</sup>

SRS: Yes, I let the reader know that I'm a mother in *Subversive Intent*. In the next to the last chapter where I talk about motherhood and about the laughing mother, my own image does come in.<sup>9</sup>

MC: What are the origins of that piece? Can you talk about that? I find it an intriguing concept, especially in terms of the work that is in this show, where we do have some ironically humorous work, although there's not so much that's "playful." I think the idea of the mother being afraid of her own power, and her ability to harm her child, is a conflict that's very strong, certainly for creative women who are trying to decide between their children and their artwork. I think it would be extremely helpful if it could be understood more through art. It seems to me that in certain cultures there's more of a circle of mothers around a child, and in that situation a woman does feel secure in leaving her child with other people.

SRS: This goes back to the idea of more support for mothers, whether the support is institutionalized because you no longer have the extended family, or whether in fact it is the extended family. My daughter-in-law,

my younger son’s wife, whom I really love, maybe because I have no daughters, comes from a very large family in Venezuela, and her mother had eight siblings, most of them girls. So she has all these *tías*, these aunts, and all these cousins, and she knows the inner/outer workings of this whole bevy of women she’s surrounded by. [laughter] I think it’s very nice to have the possibility of other mothers, who are like second and third mothers. I can see that some of the women I’ve mentioned, all those women in the early years in New York and then at Barnard, were kinds of mother figures, older or middle-aged women who became models for what I could become or what a mothering type could be. I think that had something to do with the fact that my relation to my own mother was so fraught and contradictory. I didn’t want to be like her, so I found all these other women to model myself on.

MC: I think that’s not uncommon, especially among strong women, and now you’re going back and exploring that relationship more.

SRS: I definitely want to. Because in spite of everything, and although, as I write in that silver pin piece, my mother was in some ways totally impossible, utterly devoid of tact and of the ability to gauge a situation and not say the first thing that came into her head, she nevertheless played a huge role in both my and my sister’s lives, and in a good way. She played a huge role because she too had a wonderful way of laughing; she was a very fun-loving person. She was the one who took me hiking when I was a little girl, the one who played games with me, and she also had great ambitions, even though she herself didn’t achieve any huge thing. Still, after my father died, she was able to support herself and to make a life for herself in Florida, with the help of her brothers and sister.

MC: And how did you come to writing about the mother?

SRS: It’s interesting, because I realize that in my intellectual development I haven’t followed a straight line but more like overlapping waves. I always use the famous example of the hedgehog and the fox that Isaiah Berlin put into circulation. Tolstoy was a fox and Dostoevsky was a hedgehog, according to Berlin. The hedgehog keeps digging in the same hole and goes deeper and deeper, while the fox is all over the place, covering a lot of ground. And the funny thing that Berlin pointed out was that hedgehogs never want to be anything other than hedgehogs—they like being hedgehogs—but the fox is always saying “I wish I were a hedgehog, I wish I could go deeper.” I’m all over the map, definitely a fox, but I also do things overlappingly. In the mid-1970s, I was in New York, teaching at Columbia, and I was struggling over my first book. You mentioned *Subversive Intent*, which was the first *for you* but, for me, my first book was *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Liter-*

ary Genre,<sup>10</sup> which was a real struggle, but in some ways I think it's my most original book. It deals with the thesis novel, *roman à thèse*, a kind of fiction that hits you on the head with whatever you're supposed to be thinking. So there I was writing this very rigorous, structuralist study of "authoritarian fictions," but suddenly I got an invitation to participate in one of the Barnard feminist conferences, one of the very first ones, in 1975. I told myself I was definitely *not* going to speak about the *roman à thèse*, no way! Instead, I wrote a paper that later became a chapter in *Subversive Intent*, the chapter on Robbe-Grillet, which dealt with the way that the "new novel" in France made use of the mother's body by a total "othering" of it, using it as something to step on. There already was the seed of *Subversive Intent*, but I still had to finish *Authoritarian Fictions*, which was not published until 1983. I finally finished it in 1979, but I had written it in French because it was so influenced by French structuralism that I felt I had to. As if it wasn't already hard enough to write your first book on a topic that nobody had written about, that you were creating out of whole cloth more or less (that's not quite true, the *roman à thèse* is a term that we know, but nobody had really studied it), I was writing in French! Even though it was my language before English, I still write more easily in English, and did even then. So it was just another hoop to jump through. Then when I translated it, I actually rewrote it in English, and transferred some of the changes to the French manuscript as well. It was a crazy process, but in a way it was also fun to see the process of translation at work. And as the author, I had the right to change the text, not just translate it! But back in 1975, while I was struggling with this book, writing the essay on Robbe-Grillet had an incredibly liberating feel, because his work was the exact opposite of "authoritarian fictions." It was not a realist novel: it was an avant-garde piece of writing that looked, at least theoretically, like the opposite of the kind of work I was writing about. And the other liberating thing was that it really got me to read Freud, for the first time. I had read some Freud, obviously, but not in a deep way, or not in a sustained way, and it was exhilarating. You know people say that Freud is like a bogeyman for feminists, but I don't think that's true. I think that even though we might consider him dead wrong and just a Viennese Victorian sexist on many things, nevertheless he was a brilliant and fascinating writer, and not wrong about everything.

The next step along this path was in 1979, when I wrote the "Writing and Motherhood" essay for an MLA panel on motherhood. I started to read a whole lot of books that a French professor doesn't necessarily read, at least not professionally: Margaret Drabble, more Freud, and

Adrienne Rich who had just published *Of Woman Born*<sup>11</sup> not long before then, and that too was very significant, a huge leap forward. That was before I had even finished *Authoritarian Fictions*, so I was preparing the way for a lot of other work. I was writing then about the painfulness and all the problems of motherhood. The idea of the laughing mother, on the other hand, came about because of my interest in Surrealism. I had always been interested in the Surrealists, but I hadn't come to them via poetry, like some of my friends who are Surrealist scholars. I came to Surrealism through visual art and prose narratives, such as Breton's *Nadja*. Above all, I was very interested in Surrealist politics because they were so involved, as a group, in revolutionary politics. Writers and politics, that's what *Authoritarian Fictions* is really about, but unlike the “thesis novelists” the Surrealists were also playful. Somehow all of that came together in *Subversive Intent*. My argument in that book was that the historical European avant-garde, although heavily male and male-oriented, and sometimes misogynist, did have something terrific that could be very useful for women: invention and irreverence, the refusal or downgrading of authority, and parody and humor. Then I discovered Leonora Carrington, who was perfect, a wonderful artist and writer—and a mother, unlike many other women involved with Surrealism. She was also very funny, in some of her writing. And that's how I got to the idea of the playful mother, the laughing mother.

MC: I find the idea of the laughing mother intriguing. I think it's also extremely liberating in terms of the mother's subjectivity, and it's something that you don't see often, even in my exhibit, where most of the work is very serious.

SRS: Including yours.

MC: Including mine. I've been thinking of an installation that I'd like to do now that my children are out of the house. I actually had already thought of using humor, which would be a struggle in some ways but also of course liberating. Rereading your essay recently has been extremely helpful, and I'm hoping to move on with this work. It's very important too, as a way of undermining a structure, and reaching people.

SRS: Yes, and from Schiller on, the concept of play is very much linked to art. Art is play, art is the freedom of the imagination, it's the possibility of allowing yourself to roam. Art is freedom, and play is freedom—one is never freer than when one is at play, because of the gratuitousness of play. There's that sentence of Freud's that I absolutely adore, and I quote it whenever I can: “The opposite of what is playful is not what is serious, but what is real.” Play can be very serious, but at the same time, it has the unfetteredness of not being linked to the demands of reality—of

things as they are—so it allows enormous freedom, that’s what I mean by gratuitousness. Play can be very important, but it’s gratuitous too, because it is not bound by the real.

MC: Yes, and I think a pleasurable aspect of motherhood is to witness one’s children playing, because for me not only did it remind me of my own ability to play, but also how reality is filtered through play, and that that’s how children process it.

SRS: That’s true. But then the question is: if play is so important to artistic activity, and to creative activity of every kind, then why is it so rarely associated with the mother? There’s that other image I often mention, Roland Barthes’s beautiful image of a child playing around the mother. That’s his idea of himself, of his writing, that image of the little boy running around, bringing little pebbles to his mom, who sits there quietly and says, “Yes dear, that’s very nice.” What would happen if she got up and joined the game? My idea was that many things would change. Now, maybe, looking back on it from the crazy world we’re living in, you could say, “This was the high point of postmodernism, when everybody wanted to play.” But I think a certain amount of humor is very useful even in tragic times, right?

MC: Yes, absolutely. And I find your discussion of writing and motherhood, particularly maternal ambivalence and the laughing mother, as relevant now as when I first came upon it, and refreshing to reread as well. There is still a very negative reaction when mothers are willing to make their ambivalence public, like in the Rosellen Brown story that you talk about in “Writing and Motherhood.” From my own experience with my work and the exhibit, I think it’s still very much with us, with plenty of room for more work on the subject. The fact that books and journals are being published on the topic right now supports that idea.

SRS: Maybe we should end on the note of dear old Winnicott: it’s enough if we’re “good enough mothers.” We don’t have to be perfect mothers, a good enough mother is just fine.

—January 30, 2006

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 13-38.

<sup>2</sup>Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge,



MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 179-180. Suleiman, “Playing and Motherhood; or, How to Get the Most Out of the Avant-Garde,” in *Representations of Motherhood*, ed. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 272-282.

<sup>3</sup>Suleiman, “Questions of Feminism: 25 Responses,” *October* 71 (Winter 1995): 39.

<sup>4</sup>Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is*, 13-37.

<sup>5</sup>Louise Story, “Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood.” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2005, A1+.

<sup>6</sup>Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is*, 38-54.

<sup>7</sup>Suleiman, “The Silver Pin,” in *Evocative Objects*, ed. Sherry Turkle (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 184-193.

<sup>8</sup>Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, XVI-VXII.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 179-180.

<sup>10</sup>Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>11</sup>Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976).

SUSAN RUBIN SULEIMAN

## My Mother's Silver Pin



FOR A LONG TIME, I thought of it as a precious thing: a flower pin, long and slender, the sculpted leaves spreading on both sides of the stylized petals, with two symmetrically placed pearls in the middle. My mother wore it on the collar of her black dress in the photos we posed for before we left Hungary. It was in the spring of 1949, a few months before we crossed the border into Czechoslovakia. I still recall the session with the fancy photographer, who came to our house and had me leaning against doorposts in “casual” girlish poses (I was nine years old). He also took more formal pictures of my parents and me, including the one of my mother in her black dress, sitting at a table with her arms resting on an open book. Her left hand, very white and smooth, stands out against the black of her sleeves. Her head is slightly tilted, and around her mouth there plays a slight, sweet smile. She looks kind and beautiful, her eyes shining, her dark hair a halo—an elegant, still young woman of leisure. One would hardly believe, looking at her manicured hands, that a few years earlier she had been working as a maid in Buda, hiding from the Nazis with false papers. My father and I had been there too.

On the back of the photo, which I now hold in my hand, its edges slightly frayed, is an inscription in flowing black ink: *Sok szeretettel, Lilly*—with much love, Lilly. She had sent this photo to her mother, my grandmother *Rézi nagymama*, who had left Hungary the previous year with my uncle Lester, her eldest son. They were allowed to take the train, no need to walk across the border—that was before the Communist regime in Hungary cracked down on emigration. Rézi was in New York City, where we eventually joined her. Her youngest son, my “American uncle” Nick, who was doing well in the shoe business, had set her up

in a one-bedroom apartment on York Avenue not far from the Mayor's mansion, in a tall brick box that was the latest thing in those years, with doorman and elevators, and air conditioners visible in all the windows as you looked up at the blank facade. It was in her apartment that I was introduced to the wonders of television: we watched Molly Goldberg and Milton Berle religiously, and *Dragnet* too ("Just the facts, Ma'am"). How strange America was, and how green I felt!

Curiously, I have no memory of my mother ever wearing that pin after we came to the United States. She held on to it, that's certain. I have it in front of me right now, on the desk next to the photo, and keep glancing at it as I write: the pearls are slightly yellowed, and if I look closely I see many imperfections on their surface. The sculpted leaves, too, show signs of decrepitude, dotted with small gaping holes that were once filled in with glittery stones—"not diamonds," the jeweler told me recently when I took it to him for his opinion. The holes look almost as if they were there on purpose, as if the designer had wanted to alternate empty spaces with filled-in ones. It's an old pin, graceful in shape and commercially worthless. "Enjoy it, it's pretty," the jeweler said.

So why didn't she wear it? Was this modest relic of postwar Budapest unworthy in her eyes? (I think my father bought it for her shortly before the photography session, a sign of prosperity and survival.) Or was it perhaps associated with a country, and a city, that she had no desire to remember? She had lost most of her extended family in 1944, deported with the help of the Hungarian government. She never spoke about those uncles and aunts and cousins, and I have no memories of them since almost all of them lived in the provinces, far from Budapest, but when I was writing my book *Budapest Diary*, I made a pilgrimage to the city where she was born, where some of the family had lived. She spent her summer vacations there as a child. I can't even begin to imagine what it felt like for her to learn, at war's end, that all those people were dead.

Some immigrants retain their ties to the old country. I know Hungarian Jews in Boston who still refer to Budapest as "home," decades after they just barely escaped being shot into the Danube by Hungarian Nazis—that was quite the sport in the fall of 1944. Some left the country soon after the war, like us; others waited until 1956, fleeing when the borders became temporarily crossable after the failed revolution. They all started going back for visits in the 1960s and 1970s, when "goulash Communism" made life in Hungary quite pleasant again, especially for Hungarians with American passports and dollars. My uncle Lester returned to Budapest every summer for more than twenty years, right up to his death. Communism or no, the Gerbeaud pastry shop on Vörösmarty Square still served

the best sour cherry strudels, and you could dine outdoors on chicken paprikas with *nockerli* at the Duna Corso restaurant on the bank of the Danube, late into the night. Not to mention music and theater, the best in the world, according to him.

My mother had no truck with such nostalgia. She never went back to Budapest, and reminisced about her youth in that great European capital only if I pushed her hard, with photos spread out before us. “The Gellért baths, I went there often when I was courting,” or: “Do you remember our Sunday hikes in Buda, when you were little? You loved the cog railway.” Generally, she sought advancement and novelty, not memories. She had a talent for small talk with strangers, and within a few weeks after we arrived in New York, she had established several outposts of acquaintances in the neighborhood. I especially recall the children’s clothing shop on 86<sup>th</sup> Street near York Avenue, where she would go to chat with the owners in a mixture of German, Hungarian, and broken English as she looked for outfits for my baby sister. She didn’t hesitate to ask them for a discount, given our status as new immigrants. Often I felt embarrassed when I went with her, especially when she pushed me forward to translate for her or when she started telling people she had just met about her most intimate concerns: her worries about money, her anxiety about our future, her doubts about my hair! (“You must do something about your hair,” the refrain of my adolescence.) It was around that time that I began to feel she and I had nothing in common.

It occurs to me that maybe she did wear the pin in America, and it is I who have blocked it from memory. Was I ashamed of her for not being American? Was the pin, which I had thought splendid and precious in Budapest, now merely a reminder of foreignness?

After the first two years of struggle in New York, we moved to Chicago, where I went to high school—another displacement, another round of feeling like an outsider. For a short while, I had an intense friendship with a girl I thought of as the perfect American. She lived in a large frame house on the North Side, with her parents and a sister and brother (he was older, already in college, but came home for the holidays). At Christmas, they put a big tree in the middle of their living room and went caroling in the snow. I don’t remember what her mother looked like, but I recall wishing my mother were more like her: she never yelled, never nagged her daughter about her appearance. She was calm, not excitable and embarrassingly familiar with strangers. After a few weeks, my friend and I drifted apart, or maybe she snubbed me. Today, I recall only the yearning I felt to be like her, to have a family like hers.

Looking back on this now, I realize how desperate I was to be an “insider,” not different, just like other Americans. And how ashamed I must have been of my immigrant mother, who never learned to speak English properly and never learned to speak calmly. But the drive for assimilation came from her as well; in a curious way, I was fulfilling her desire by wanting to have little to do with her. Success in school was my escape, my chance to leave her and foreignness behind. I was offered a scholarship to Barnard College in New York, and jumped at it. My mother was happy too, knowing I was in a fancy school. Sometimes a new acquaintance would notice an accent and ask me about it, but most people I met in college thought of me as a girl from Chicago. I had a little black dress for parties, and my hair was finally in shape.

Back in Chicago, my father gradually made his way to a job he was proud of, as the executive director of a Hebrew day school. In the summer before my senior year, ten years after we had left Budapest, he died of a heart attack at the age of forty-nine. It took me a long time to mourn for him, but that is another story. We gave up our apartment in Chicago and sold its meager furnishings. My mother and my little sister, who was nine years old, lived for a year in New York, then moved to Miami Beach to be near my uncles and aunt. Meanwhile, I spent a year in Paris after college (generously financed by Uncle Nick), then moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts to start graduate school at Harvard. Another displacement, another promotion.

I visited my mother once or twice a year: she treated me like a dignitary, parading me to family and friends. Rarely did a visit end without some outburst on my part. I had no patience with her; it was clear that we would never understand each other. I had adored her as a child in Budapest, but that time was very far away. A few years later, after I got married and became a mother too, there were no more outbursts. The gap between us, however, persisted.

It makes me feel sad and ashamed, with a different shame, not the shame I felt as a teenager, to realize how little I valued her. But there is anger there too. If I was incapable of feeling love for her—or of expressing love, which in a sense is the same thing—was it not her fault as well as mine? I tell myself that she was tactless, that she spoke too loudly, that she was interested only in the superficial signs of success.

Yet, others did love her. After almost twenty years of widowhood she married again, and her new husband doted on her. He was a retired dentist, Hungarian-Romanian, a widower—they got along well together, a real couple. When she became ill a few years later, he took care of her; when she died in 1988, aged almost eighty, he mourned her as if they had been

together a lifetime. After her death, we kept hearing from people who had known her—she had been the belle of Lincoln Road, one old lady told us. She was fun to be with; she had a thousand friends.

My sister and I often talk about her now: she was impossible, yes, but she was brave and energetic too, and she had gone through a lot.

We inherited her photos and her few pieces of jewelry. I got the old photos from Hungary, many with inscriptions on the back. Among them was the picture of her wearing the silver pin, so elegant and beautiful. The pin also came to me, along with a delicate gold orchid pin she had acquired in America. I put that one in my jewelry box; the silver pin disappeared into a jumble of old trinkets in a drawer: an antique belt buckle given to me by a French friend many years ago, broken or unmatched earrings, watches that no longer ran. Devalued, like my mother in America? Yes, but not thrown out—lying dormant.

The gold orchid, when I wear it, often reminds me of my mother; but it is simply a pretty object, carrying no strong emotion. The silver pin evokes bruises and ambivalence, emotional knots difficult to untangle. When I dug it out of the drawer, it was nearly black with grime. I tried dipping it in jewelry cleaner, but it still remained dull and dark, so I took it to silver polish and managed to get it to shine. It's quite pretty, as the jeweler said. I pinned it on a black jacket I wore a few weeks ago. I haven't worn it since then and don't know when I will again. But it has moved to the jewelry box on top of my dresser. I suppose that's progress, of a sort.

*Illustration on page 66 by Myrel Chernick.*

ANDREA LISS

## The Body in Question

### Rethinking Motherhood, Alterity and Desire

IN MY CONTINUOUS RESEARCH TOWARD thinking difference and desire other than markers of discrimination and inscriptions of unidirectional control, I turned to feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's writing on ethics:

In the work of French feminists, ethics is not opposed to politics but is a continuation of it within the domain of relations between self and other. Ethics need not imply a moral or normative code, or a series of abstract regulative principles. Rather, it is the working out or negotiation between an other (or others) seen as prior to and pre-given for the subject, and a subject. Ethics is a response to the recognition of the primacy of alterity over identity. Ethics, particularly in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, is that field defined by the other's need, the other's calling on the subject for a response. In this case, *the paradigm of an ethical relation is that of a mother's response to the needs or requirements of a child.*<sup>1</sup> [Emphasis added]

I knew that my attraction to Grosz's way of thinking, even in this short excerpt, would yield areas of touching between difference and desire. The strategic import of recognizing interpersonal relations as political investment. Making room for an other who would not be construed as so distant that there could be no points of convergence between self and other. Not confusing places of merging as sameness, respecting independent otherness. As I continued reading, my musing/theorizing came to a halt when I reached the point in Grosz's discussion where the mother is introduced. I was riveted by her representation, following Emmanuel Levinas, that the perfect exemplar of the ethical relationship is that of the mother's lack of selfhood ("the primacy of alterity over identity")

and her complete giving to the child. Indeed, is this not a contemporary reworking of the all-too-pervasive legacy of the sacrificial (virgin) mother? My feminist-mother self felt betrayed. How disheartening to find, in a book titled *Sexual Subversions*, the figure of mother again, ad infinitum, at the selfless center bearing the burden of representation and singular responsibility. We can't blame Grosz, my microconversation with myself continued, she's not speaking for herself. She's offering a concise recapitulation of Levinas's complex and alluring conception of self and other in an encounter where they might meet in the new space of alterity.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for all of Levinas's attempts to detour the self-righteousness embedded in much of Judeo-Christian ethics in order to reconfigure an expanded sense of self, he nonetheless falls into some central unquestioned biblical conventions. These conventions often occur in the instances when he weaves the figures of woman and mother into his writing.<sup>3</sup>

Feeling I had fairly well satisfied my unease with that portion of Grosz's passage, I wanted to move on. But I couldn't cut myself loose from it: "the paradigm of an ethical relation is that of a mother's response to the needs or requirements of *a child*." Wait a minute. There was something oddly impersonal in this description of the most perfect of inter-subjective ethical relations. Why didn't the passage read "her child" rather than "a child?" Was this distancing the author's perhaps unconscious fear of the child and/or her recognition of the impossibility of the mother in this paradigmatic relation?

It's 2:30 p.m. already. Naptime at the Song of Songs preschool. Miles is probably in luxurious sleep by now. I feel myself relax a bit. This is time I couldn't be with him anyway, so theoretically it doesn't have to be as productive as the hours when he is awake and out of the house. If only he could be transported here during naptime so we could be in each other's presence. I could continue to work, feel my love for him, but not have to attend to any of the caregiving. So I'm not the most ethical mother.

When Levinas was thinking about the ethical mother, he did not endow her to muse on childcare, economic, or professional concerns. But Marx and Darwin weren't thinking about their mothers at all. Freud thought about his perhaps in excess. Rather than being theoretically violated as the site of sensational lack as in Freud's conception, the Levinasian mother has the agency of caring, of not turning the other cheek. Caring and empathy, you (and I) might say, are the quintessential qualities traditionally coded as feminine, maternal. Who wants them? Let's give them up. But watch out: what we just gave away could become valued commodities and we'll be written out of the profits. An infinitely more



difficult strategy whose benefits would be longer term, however, is to embrace just these qualities and not allow them to be kept solely in the private realm, assigned to their “proper place.” Much more subversive is to embrace maternal giving and set it into motion in unexpected places rather than to passively-aggressively let it be stolen from us and allow ourselves to become men-women in a man’s world. In other words, to grant oneself the gift of what is normally taken for granted.

At stake then is strategically negotiating between engrained codes of maternity and embracing the lived complexities of chosen motherhood. This process, as you can imagine, is hazardous double labor. There is no other body so cruelly and poignantly posed at the edges dividing the public and private realms. The issue may still be so silent, too, because of the uncertainties surrounding the issue of sacrifice related to women in a supposedly “post-feminist” culture. The dilemma becomes, indeed, how to speak of the difficulties and incomparable beauties of making space for another unknown person without having those variously inflected and complex experiences turned into clichés of what enduring motherhood is supposed to be. Such tyrannical moves occur in the propaganda where the diverse complexities are so flatly neutralized that the (feminist) mother finds part of herself being dumbly celebrated as the paradigm of domesticity and compliance to the limits of passivity in the (perverse) name of patriotism, especially if that public mother has stepped too far out of her assigned place. Remember Hillary Rodham Clinton reduced to participating in a chocolate-chip cookie bake-off with Barbara Bush? The (Im)Moral Majority’s failed rhetoric is also embedded, however differently and unconsciously, in the minds of many feminists. There is the silent, sympathetic assumption that we will involuntarily lose part of our thinking, creative (male) minds when children are born from our all-too-female bodies.

How could I blame them for thinking this? During pregnancy and immediately afterwards, I had my own always-in-flux fears. My anxieties kept the body and mind intact; time is what I couldn’t make sense of. “Will you be going back to work in three months?” asked one of my maternity nurses in the disembodied voice of an unemployment benefits officer. Little did she know that my life was about constantly thinking and working. Her foreign question was unwelcome and lodged itself in the private hospital room made public where my newborn child and I had come to know each other for only one day.

Then there is the false belief that these equally mindless creatures called infants will turn our heads to mush from our so-called idle hours of adoration or devour us by their own frighteningly relentless bodily

needs. The hazards in approaching these half-truths are that, of course, these conditions exist, if only partially and temporarily. The taboo against representing motherhood again strikes deep because the real pleasures of caring for a new other and falling in love again differently are tyrannically conflated with essentialized, feminized qualities projected as implacable and designed to keep us assigned to our proper places. The “truth” is that we are constantly in motion; we are never only in one place. We work against allowing “mother” to slip into a place of nostalgia for the norm. The mind and body of the mother are constantly in labor.

I wonder if I am risking too much here, conjoining my voice as an art historian-critic with my newly acquired mother chords/cords? In a rare public forum on motherhood initiated by Mira Schor and Susan Bee in their *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* magazine (No. 12, November 1992), the editors posed a series of questions to a diverse group of women artists who are mothers. These included, “How has being a mother affected people’s response or reaction to your artwork? How has it affected your career? Did you postpone starting your career or stop working when your children were young?” May Stevens chose not to respond to the questions the editors addressed to her. Here is what she offered as a counter response:

How many artists are fathers? How has it affected their work, people’s response to their work, their careers? Did Jeff Koons or Frank Stella postpone their careers in order to take their responsibilities as fathers seriously? Did Pace, Castelli, Sonnabend, or Mary Boone discriminate against Schnabel, Salle, or Marden because of fatherhood?

...I will be happy to discuss questions of motherhood after your journal seriously researches fatherhood among artists. In the present, when women bring up children alone and bear primary—often sole—responsibility, financial and emotional, for the next generation, it’s fatherhood that needs looking at.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Stevens’s warning call is absolutely necessary, lest public discussions of the dilemmas facing artist-mothers involuntarily shield the “prolific artist” father who so gratuitously moves between the public and private realms. But such a warning cannot be sent at the cost of silencing the mother, again. Indeed, as the editors wrote in their introduction to the forum, the “subject proved too painful for some artists who couldn’t write responses. More than one artist wondered how we’d found out that she *had* a child, so separate had children been kept from art world life.”<sup>5</sup> When I recently told a male academic colleague that I was writ-

ing an essay on motherhood and representation, he enthusiastically suggested that there must be a great deal of visual work on the subject. He said, "I would think that it would be natural." "What is 'natural' is the repression," I responded. It's about time the taboo was unleashed, for mother's sake. As Dena Shottenkirk so aptly put it in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*: "Like morality, good manners, and a criminal record, motherhood has nothing to do with making art. Its presence neither improves one's ability, nor does it sap one's creativity like Nietzsche's worried model of having one's vital powers drained from sperm ejaculations. Giving birth does not automatically mean giving up."<sup>6</sup>

The "one's ability" and "one's creativity" in this section of Shottenkirk's account is strategically interpolated as both male and female. It is women, however, who give birth. And, as artist Joan Snyder put it, "The bottom line is that you don't have to be a mother or a daughter to be discriminated against in the art world ... you just have to be a woman."<sup>7</sup>

At stake in breaching this taboo and giving birth to a new provocation is recognizing that motherhood and women are passed over in the unacknowledged name of devalued labor, whether in procreation or artistic-thinking activity, within a patriarchal scheme crafted to inflate supposedly male qualities of rigor and singularly driven creativity. The uneven distribution of interest between woman and artist-thinker becomes all the more cruelly amortized in the case of mother as artist-thinker. "Mother" hovers as the uneasy subset to "woman" as well as silently operating as its unacknowledged frame. The devaluation of mother is always at once the devaluation of women. Conversely, and especially in relation to the current hateful debates and legal dogma against abortion, the degradation of women/woman is being forcibly exercised on her decision not to mother. "Mother" takes on an especially irregular symmetry to women/woman. Psychoanalytically construed, woman is always at a loss. The exception to her lesser condition is pregnancy, which gives her a provisional status of phallic proportions and privilege—another of Freud's dreams of plenitude. She immediately loses that privilege in the postpartum state. She is further insulted through the processes by which her children gain accession to "proper" or normal sexual coding. The young boy is traumatized by the difference in his and his mother's genitals; her gaping hole (we are inclined to write this abyss as a whole) signals primordial lack. He can proclaim what he has as distinct from hers and find clear-cut identification with the father. And with that, he can take a sigh of relief.

Have you ever tried to tell your young son that he has what his father has? I recently asked my three-year-old if he thought his genitals were like his daddy's. "Oh yucky, mommy," he most independently proclaimed,

“daddy’s are daddy’s, and mine are mine.” “Do you have balls, mommy?” he then asked. “No,” I replied, “I have doors, and openings and other things inside.” Miles looked at me thoughtfully, “Oh, that’s good.” Pause. “Can we make Jell-O now?”

According to the psychoanalytic scheme, the daughter’s sense of identification is more marred, less distinct (we would write it as infused with oscillation, open-ended). Because the sign of “mature” sexual development in psychoanalytic terms is separation, the girl too must make her leave of the mother. But imagine her dilemma: she has what the mother has but must denounce it. This disavowal must not be too strong lest the young girl loses all identification with the mother and tries to accede toward male identity. She must not cast off the memory of her own tainted incompleteness, for it is her legacy to pass it on. The girl then becomes a mother and must undergo a triple debasement—her daughter’s repudiation. So for the mother, Freud’s deaccessioning of the feminine is a multiple site of violation. If woman is bodiless and the daughter is always the indistinct shadow of her mother, the mother (once a daughter) bears the impossible burden of being both the figure of invisibility and the embodiment of vulnerability, of exposed body. So the asymmetrical relation of mother to women/woman becomes even more acute. Between “woman” (the projection) and “women” (the deceitful ones who don’t match up, who always inscribe their multiple selves onto the scene) there is forceful play. Ironically, “mother” has not been accorded an oscillating, de-referential term that acknowledges there is a real mother and that there are both grave and joyful differences between tyrannical expectations and lived experience. “(M)other” thus conflates the uneasy absence/presence of the mother’s body in the non-space between palpable body and its impossible representation.<sup>8</sup>

Father’s Day, 1989. I am ten moons pregnant and could give birth any minute. My brother is given a package of wildflowers to disseminate, although everyone’s eyes are on me. So I take out the snapshots of a recent bike-riding jaunt, half forgetting/remembers that the roll also contains frames of my posed naked pregnantness. No one said anything until the photographs reached my husband’s mother. “I didn’t know you were such an exhibitionist!” she shrieked. I enjoyed her embarrassed surprise, for it seemed to be ever so coyly tinged with her own mischievous delight. So let the prepartum gazes be multiple. What I had been thinking about was making traces of pregnancy for myself and for my then-opaque child, far from the Demi Moore glamour on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.<sup>9</sup> Not to promenade my body, but to show her/him that there are no stigmata attached.

Susan Hiller documented the changes her body and her thinking underwent during pregnancy. In her photograph and text installation *Ten Months* (1977–79), she framed images of her expanding belly in a grid format. Strategically presented to ensure that the body would not be voyeuristically violated, the photographs distance the belly from its owner in images that nonetheless convey a lovely eroticism both estranged from and akin to medical illustrations. Serious and engaging artwork by mothers that acknowledges the monumental moments of pregnancy is crucial and rare. Astonishingly few are representations that bracket the differences between mother (the projection) and mothers (with child[ren]), living the conflation/complexities of their lives.<sup>10</sup> Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, which began in 1973, of course comes to mind.<sup>11</sup> Working both ironically within and outside the bounds/binds of psychoanalytic theory, Kelly's labor-and-time-intensive project meticulously establishes that the mother is anything but passive in the infant and young child's development. *Post-Partum Document* grants the mother an active writing and thinking position and an often preoccupied space within the Lacanian scheme of the child's Imaginary. The mother who meticulously measures her infant's intake of food, registers his excrement as traces, and, later, inscribes the parallel registers of their conceptual development is the artist-mother simultaneously claiming these mini-memorials as her own fetishes for exhibition. It is also the mother who, in terms clearly oppositional to patriarchy's incising of the romanticized mother, proclaims the mother and the child's in(ter)dependence while admitting her uncertain guilt around the notion of the "good mother." She thus inscribes the mother-child relationship both against and within the grain. Indeed, it is Kelly's very adherence to the psychoanalytic scheme, both in the timing and phrasing of the fetish/memorials and in her own writing within the book, that creates the necessary oscillation between psychoanalytic litany and how the mother-child/son relationship is played out in the everyday. In one particularly potent section of the *Post-Partum Document*, dealing with, as Kelly phrased it, "the mother's ambivalence about working outside the home" and the psychoanalytic scheme of separation anxiety, Kelly typed texts from her diary onto cut-up fragments of her son's comforter. At the mark of her son's two-and-a-half years, she wrote: "K's aggressiveness has resurfaced and made me feel anxious about going to work. I can't count the number of 'small wounds' I've got as a result of his throwing, kicking, biting etc.... I'm not the only object of his wrath but I'm probably the source. Maybe I should stay at home ... but we need the money."<sup>12</sup> When her son turned two years and seven months, she wrote again: "I'm really enjoying my

present relationship with K., going out to lunch, to the park, shopping together. There're no potty problems and few tantrums. He's fulfilling my fantasy image of a son as little companion-lover."<sup>13</sup> It is both Kelly's poignant honesty toward and her rhetorical insistence on the intimacies of the mother-child relationship, among other factors, that have granted the *Post-Partum Document* so much attention.

*Post-Partum Document* was a crucial factor in British feminist debates of the 1970s centered around the uneasy status of representing women's bodies. In a long moment when women were reclaiming their bodies for themselves, and Laura Mulvey was establishing theoretical and practical links between Freudian looking and the male film spectator,<sup>14</sup> it was a strategic feminist move to eschew easily available mimetic representations of women's bodies. What I am of course bracketing here are the debates between female essentialism and a more analytic stance that posits bodies and identities as highly constructed and exploited entities. Strategic as these ways of thinking were in the 1970s, ways of representing that do not continue the patriarchal scheme that divides women's minds from our bodies and desires are crucial now. *Post-Partum Document's* schematic and indexical objects were thus fashioned at the farthest remove from ethereal images of pregnant mothers surrounded in religiosity or from equally untenable romanticized representations of mothers in the aftermath of birth. So what sense can we make of the startling photograph of Mary Kelly seated with her son on her lap, the unspoken image which serves as the book's frontispiece? Her dark shirt (could it be crescent moons printed on it?) helps to highlight K's light-toned body and underwear. He stands out against her: his genitals are hardly contained within. She bends over looking down, while he resolutely holds a microphone in his hand and looks out with a determined, anchored gaze. Is this image included here as Kelly's way of breaching the taboo against mimetic representation, even against her own grain? Or is this phallic image present to remind us, before we move into the mother's assertions, that it is the boy who really reigns? No, let's be fair. It wasn't Kelly's fault that she had a boy. How differently we would read this photograph if a girl was couched in the mother's lap with that steadfast gaze? How different would the body of Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* be had her child been a girl?<sup>15</sup>

"Mommy," Miles said to me the way he does, inflecting this laden term with a healthy mix of wonder, curiosity and skepticism (my projections?), "Mommy, pee like me. Stand up and do it." Holding back my laughter, I tried not to say "I can't," but that I do it another way. He insisted, "No, do it like me." When I couldn't stall him any longer, he broke out

in a scream and a torrent of tears such as I had never seen before. Then came the dreaded “I hate you.” A few seconds later, calm. He embraces me to comfort him. “Mommy, I love you.”

“Don’t you think that risks reifying essentialism?” was the response one of my feminist colleagues gave me when I told her I was inviting into the classroom the facts, falsities, and experiences of being a mother. “No,” I remember saying, “I am scheming on my ‘mother’ identity in order to bring out multiple, conflictive responses and encourage new ways of thinking.” The conversation did not progress on those grounds and turned to more “objective” discussions of which feminist writers we were currently reading. What I would want to say, to continue the discussion, is that when only one student in my Feminist Issues class brings in an image of a mother to my call for images of working women, we have much more work to do. I would want to say that, indeed, this strategy does verge on provocative ways of acknowledging the body of woman/mother, those sensual and very sexy virgin spaces that must be conceived, that such conceptions help to breach the obdurate wall of fear that has so vehemently separated women’s public and private lives. Call it essentialism if you like, but realize that such name-calling wrapped in binarism risks its own stultification. I would rather use my body as a site of knowledge than rhetorically give it up.

Writing on what she terms “essentialism with a difference,” Rosi Braidotti asserts that:

First and foremost in the reevaluation of experience is the notion of the bodily self: the personal is not only the political, it is also the theoretical. In redefining the self as an embodied entity, affectivity and sexuality play a dominant role, particularly in relation to what makes a subject want to think: the desire to know. The “epistemo-philic” tension that makes the deployment of the knowing process possible is the first premise in the redefinition of “thinking as a feminist woman.”<sup>16</sup>

The strategic move on Braidotti’s part to affirm the sexed female “I” is not to be confused with a fantasized and ultimately patriarchal will toward exclusionary power. It is a provisional working politic that, it seems to me, would find an uneasy alliance with the essentialism of the 1960s and 1970s. In terms of visual representation, I am thinking particularly about Judy Chicago’s *Birth Project*, begun in 1980 and published in book form in 1985, whose emphasis is so insistently focused on the physical/spiritual body of the universalized mother that the complexities

of her material body in a politicized world are kept out of reach.<sup>17</sup> The 1990s' "essentialism with a difference" stands in closer relation with French feminism and *écriture féminine* and is careful not to pose itself in binary opposition with the history/culture dyad. As Braidotti thinks it:

The "body" in question is the threshold of subjectivity: as such it is neither the sum of its organs—a fixed biological essence—nor the result of social conditioning—a historical entity. The "body" is rather to be thought of as the point of intersection, as the interface between the biological and the social, that is to say between the socio-political field of the microphysics of power and the subjective dimension.<sup>18</sup>

The political project in redefining "essentialism with a difference" is precisely to disengage the female "I" from its bindings, "defined as the dark continent, or of 'femininity' as the eternal masquerade," as Braidotti puts it.<sup>19</sup> "Far from being prescriptive in an essentialist-deterministic way," she writes, "it opens a field of possible 'becoming.'"<sup>20</sup>

To assert the sexed bodily "I" of the woman then becomes, indeed, a doubled and risky reinvestment in the body of mother. Claiming there is a body in the maternal subject might be, to some, stating the obvious. But in the face of this "natural body," this material presence, the patriarchal mode has manufactured the mother/woman into a site upon which it occupies feminine territory as mystery, artificiality, and emptiness. To reassert the sexed "I" of the mother engages her sexuality in a new field of becoming.

It is altogether fitting that Luce Irigaray's body of thinking would surface in any discussion about reinvesting the name of the mother. Merely coupling "essentialism" with Irigaray's own name in the same sentence enters the battlefields in the war over her particularly provocative inflection on the body of woman and women's bodies.<sup>21</sup> What I would like to highlight here is the special significance Irigaray gives to the body of woman and the doubled rhetorical insistence she accords the body of mother. Through her incisive and strategically "excessive" language, language rejoicing in women's bodily fluids and mindful openings, Irigaray renders psychoanalysis's feigned posturing an impostor. That is, male-inflected psychoanalytic theory tells us that we are being too literal if we read the phallus as solely biological and confined only to male member/ownership. It functions, after all, as a figure and a sign. But, let's remember, there is no corollary ambiguity when it comes to female members. Irigaray plays on this unbridgeable difference with a vengeance:



Speculation whirls round faster and faster as it pierces, bores, drills into a volume that is supposed to be *solid* still.... Whipped along spinning, twirling faster and faster until matter shatters into pieces, crumbles into dust. Or into the substance of language? The matrix discourse? The mother's "body"? ...*Thela woman never closes up into a volume*.... But the woman and the mother are not mirrored in the same fashion. A double specularization in and between her/them is already in place. And more. For the sex of woman is not one.<sup>22</sup>

In rethinking the body of mother as a palpable, thinking space, I think back to the 1977 film by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *Riddles of the Sphinx*. Conceived within many of the debates out of which Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* arose, this complex and lovely film reminds us, in our 1990s research for (im)possible representations of motherhood, that the issue is not necessarily about figuring mother as a paradigmatic body but endowing her with the space to look. Among many of its cinematic moves as well as the mother's economic and psychic transformations in the film, it is the camera's slow, sensuous caressing and often circular trajectories within the domestic/social spaces of the kitchen and the child's room that project a different guiding system for the gaze.

That the Lacanian gaze has more recently been construed as male is not only one (unfortunate mis)reading of Lacan but a giving-up of the very place where maternal touching can be reconfigured and differently insinuated. In his well-known essay "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," Lacan describes the mirror stage as the obscure border between the fragmented self and its imagined double, its "imago."<sup>23</sup> On one level, Lacan's conception of the mirror stage is based on child development: that infants from about six to eighteen months find pleasure, comfort, and amusement (Lacan's translated wording is "jubilant assumption") in viewing their specular image. The emphasis on the young child gazing into a mirror or at the mother's body is a highly appropriate image, steeped as it is in relations between vision and the body. It highlights the complex and patrolled intersections between the private and the public, the biographic and the collective, the psychic and the political. Indeed, the body is the stage on which these divisions leave their traces. It is especially significant that Lacan would place such weight on the image of two bodies facing each other in an asymmetrical relation. That is, the body of the infant/child not yet in full control of its motor faculties and the false fullness of its reflected image, either in a mirror or in the body of another/mother.

Lacan handles the difficulty of conceiving both the processes and the effects of the reflected/projected image of the physical body onto the psychic body through thinking it in the following manner: “the mirror-stage would seem to be the *threshold* of the visible world” [emphasis added].<sup>24</sup> Thus, the mirror stage is not simply the self’s entrance into another, more stabilizing form, leaving the mother behind in the Imaginary for accession to the realm of language. Nor is the transformation of the child into the Symbolic a clear-cut division. A threshold is decidedly that place always bridging the next stage of entry. It is also the sill of the door, its buffer between inside and outside. The term “threshold” carries both a physiological and psychological significance, being the point at which an effect begins to be produced. If the threshold that the mother signifies is not easily crossed, it may well remain as a coherent trace of the splintery cushioning of the once unmarked self. Thus if the mother’s body is coded at the site of specularization and assurance for the child, we know that the space of temporary intactness she holds for the child is maintained through her own touching and caressing, and the surveying gazes are reciprocal.

“Ethics ... is that field defined by the other’s needs, the other’s calling on the subject for a response. In this case, the paradigm of an ethical relation is that of a mother’s response to the needs or requirements of a child”: it has been two-and-a-half years since that passage, in the echo of Levinas, arrested me. It seemed an impossible burden for the mother (me, and many others) to bear. Even outside of the mother paradigm, it has been noted that Levinas’s philosophy puts an enormous weight of ethicalness not only on the subject, but also on the other who is asked to call the subject to responsibility.<sup>25</sup> Yet the mother’s responsibility no longer seems so formidable. In the Levinasian sense, it simply is. And one responds. Responding and giving to the child’s utter otherness is, indeed, an act of sacrifice. Rather than construing the mother-child relation as an essentialized binding, the coupling can be embraced as yielding the fruits of reciprocal relations. The task now is to think of the mother-child paradigm in its material complexities and as a metaphor for new relations of alterity between sexes, races, and classes. In relation to the infamous Baby M case, feminist legal contract lawyer Patricia J. Williams juxtaposes her mixed ancestry with the legal ramifications of “likeness”:

A white woman giving totally to a black child; a black child totally and demandingly dependent for everything, for sustenance itself, from a white woman. The image of a white woman suckling a

black child; the image of a black child sucking for its life from the bosom of a white woman. The utter interdependence of such an image; the selflessness, the merging it implies; the giving up of boundary; the encompassing of other within self; the unbounded generosity, the interconnectedness of such an image. Such a picture says that there is no difference; it places the hope of continuous generation, of immortality of the white self in a little black face.<sup>26</sup>

Embedded in the notion of sacrifice is the act of giving. This giving need not always devalue her/him by giving under unfavorable conditions, but may be construed as enhancing the giver through the offering. To attempt to represent the unrepresentable, shifting beauties of being a mother to a very specific child is also to acknowledge our historical inscription as gendered bodies while refusing boundaries and reinscribing desire. The more historically inscribed and arguably less desirable notion of sacrificing implies the giving up that verges on selflessness, on the mother's internal deaths. In one of Jacques Derrida's most crucial texts on mourning, he weaves a discussion of transfigured narcissism in which the self comes to understand its imprecise proximities with the grieved other. He was writing about the actual death of a friend.<sup>27</sup> I am thinking about this text in relation to the transfigured places of living alterity between mother and child:

Memory and interiorization: since Freud, this is how the "normal" "work of mourning" is often described. It entails a movement in which an interiorizing idealization takes in itself or upon itself the body and voice of the other, the other's visage and person, ideally and quasi-literally devouring them. This mimetic interiorization is not fictive; it is the origin of fiction, of apocryphal figuration. It takes place in a body. Or rather, it makes a place for a body, a voice, and a soul which although "ours," did not exist and had no meaning before this possibility that one must begin by remembering, and whose trace must be followed.... We can only live this experience in the form of an aporia ... where the possible remains impossible. Where success fails. And where faithful interiorization bears the other and constitutes him in me (in us) at once living and dead. It makes the other part of us, between us—and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other, because we grieve for him and bear him in us, like an unborn child, like a future. And inversely, the failure succeeds;

an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us.<sup>28</sup>

In the context of the mother-child schema, the first part of Derrida's text on mourning reads like the child projecting itself on and through the mother's body. The trace of the mother cannot be "successfully" contained, nor can the mother overpower the child. The mutual renunciations are tender rejections and acts of love. *Be/coming different*: outside of oneself, inside the other, in both places at once. Neither occupying nor dominating. To love without domination might then be a coming to understand that one cannot overwhelm, cannot completely inhabit, cannot "have" the other. To love without overtaking might then be an admission of distance, a recognition of sorrow. A little bit of figurative mourning. The geographies of self expanding. Succumbing as powerful abandon.

"Mommy, are you done writing about women?" In his tenderly demanding voice issuing forth with uncanny timing, Miles interrupts my reverie. I cross over the threshold between the mindful Imaginary and the maternal Symbolic, a space women/mothers have been crossing for an eternity, knowing that my work on both sides of the mirror will never be finished.

#### POSTSCRIPT

When I wrote this essay, I was in the midst of writing a book on rethinking how documentary photographs have been used to memorialize the victims of the European Holocaust during World War II.<sup>29</sup> I would think about mothers who became so debilitated by illness, war, or genocide that to mother went beyond the verb, was too painful for verbal or visual expression, challenging maternal representation. I also thought about children who were so sick they could not care for themselves, whose situations begged the depths of maternal care, no matter how painstakingly and lovingly gave it. My nightly ritual of caressing my then four-year-old son's cheek as he slept took on an urgency and profundity I could hardly bear. Even at such a young age, Miles's tenderness gave me a previously unknown sense of bodily and psychic solidity. My maternal self was in constant motion and transformation. It never ceases to be. How deeply dependent he was on my body and my love, a mutual love that over the years has become less bound to his physical needs and has ever-so-subtly

and inextricably turned into my dependence on him, although not the life-sustaining kind. Our relationship is, indeed, interdependent. Yet naming it as such seems too fixed, too determined, too duly enmeshed. It is more undefined, open, part of the unconscious, like overlappings of the self with the intimate other where the mother's and the child's senses of being are constantly in flux. This more fluid and differently inflected sense of interdependence, this intersubjective alterity, recognizes the possibilities for mutual acknowledgements of needs and continuous unfolding of selves between the mother and the child. Yet it seems that I need him now more than he needs me. From the moment Miles was born, I knew our intimacies were already foreshadowing his own sense of self, time passing inexorably, his leaving.

Since the first publication of this essay in 1994 to its second appearance in 2004 and its gracious inclusion in this crucial book, it is still against the norm in the field of cultural theory and visual art writing for a feminist to proclaim herself a mother or a mother to name herself a feminist, and in so doing, allow the deepest textures of her maternal thoughts to collide and play with feminist thinking, psychoanalytic theory, popular culture, and the real life experiences of feminist mothers.<sup>30</sup>

"Andrea, you know we only take avant-garde projects." This remark represents the beginning of the stream of insults and injuries, some more covert than others, hurled at the mere idea of a book that challenged the cultural oppositions set up between motherhood and feminism. To even suggest that motherhood be loosened from its patriarchal bindings, even within the "avant-garde" milieu of publishing houses and exhibition venues, was not to be allowed. I am heartened that pioneering feminist artists whose early artwork brought maternal thinking to the artistic surface were represented in the recent international exhibition "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution."<sup>31</sup> It's about time, for mother's sake. These artists' works stand out to me like beacons.

I am a traveler on treacherous waters. I enter Miles's room. The quiet organization he is undertaking takes me over. This is a sure sign of his leaving. I have been watching for warning signs of this silent tsunami, waiting for it to strike. I am stranded before this surface of order and calm. There is no beacon of safety for me.

This is no longer figurative mourning. My son is leaving. Thank g-d he is healthy in body and soul, but his departure marks the end of an intimate ebb and flow that has developed between us over eighteen years. One way of stating it is that he will be "on his own," as if that is a valid aspiration, born as it is from patriarchal concepts of individuality and isolation. I cannot accept this codified concept of separation, the

normality of “letting him go”—part Freudian (the mother is always left behind) and part capitalist realism (everything is trivialized and commodified). Separation, loss, and distance are painful, no matter how they are perversely normalized. Thinking of both of us, I have wondered for over a year now how I will cope with Miles’s leaving, how I will mourn the impalpability of his presence. The perfect irony of completing my book *Feminist Art and the Maternal* the very week of his leaving marks the intricate alterities of our lives.<sup>32</sup> Thinking of our time together in his new haven and comforting me, Miles says, “We still have a week.” *One week*. How does that stark number compare with the seemingly endless moments and days that wondrously wedded your infancy to your childhood to your young manhood?

The moment of your leaving. An unrepresentable moment that insists itself onto my psyche, resists physical location. An implacable distance fragments our words, our bodies. The water that bound us when I carried you now transformed into the miles of ocean that both separate and connect us. Still.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), xvii.

<sup>2</sup>For Grosz’s reading of Levinas’s notion of alterity through Luce Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference, see her Chapter 5 in the book cited above. For Luce Irigaray’s reading of Levinas and the touch of the other, see her “Fecundity of the Caress,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 231-56. For Levinas’s own writings, see especially his *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1978) and “Ethics and the Face,” in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>Jacques Derrida notes Levinas’s ambiguity toward “woman’s place” in “Choreographies,” interview with Christie V. McDonald, *Diacritics* (Summer 1982): 72-73, note 5. It is interesting that Jacques Derrida, who himself weaves the figure of woman into some impossible projections (her “non-essence” within the fantasy of artificiality), would be so attentive to these slippages. For Derrida’s use of the figure of woman, see especially the “Choreographies” interview as well as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman,” in *Displacement: Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 164-95 and her essay “Feminism and Deconstruction,

Again: Negotiating with Unacknowledged Masculinism,” in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 206-23.

<sup>4</sup>Susan Bee and Mira Schor, “Forum: On Motherhood, Art and Apple Pie.” *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 12 (1992): 40.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>8</sup>The mother’s in-between space of ever-presence and invisibility was again brought to the cultural surface when I was in search of the important and wonderful book *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*, eds. Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). I first went to find it at a college bookstore whose critical studies section is especially good and whose buyer is very conscientious. When I queried him about why this particular reference was not ordered, he responded self-consciously, “I thought it was too specialized.”

<sup>9</sup>Annie Leibovitz’s photographs of a seven months pregnant Demi Moore were featured in *Vanity Fair*’s August 1991 issue. As cited in the magazine’s October 1991 issue, in the United States alone ninety-five different television spots on the photographs reached 110 million viewers, sixty-four radio shows on 31 different stations were devoted to the subject, and more than 1,500 newspaper articles and editorial cartoons were generated. The movie star’s nude appearance was also noticed in publication in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan and South America. In a paper given by Susan Kandel on May 9, 1992, at the Whitney Museum’s 15th Annual Symposium on American Art and Culture, whose theme was “Femininity and Masculinity: The Construction of Gender and the Transgression of Boundaries in 20th-Century American Art and Culture,” the author noted that “while the self-righteous on the right lambasted the photos’ flamboyant immodesty, the well-intentioned on the left hailed its progressive-ness.” In her paper, Kandel makes the crucial point that despite the photographs’ insistence that sexuality and motherhood are not mutually exclusive, their feigned feminism “is fashioned out of a set of conventions peculiar to the little-known subgenre of pregnancy porn: belly displayed as if it were—to borrow from the pornographic lexicon—tits, ass or bush; and woman displayed as an expanded object, happily complicit both with her expansion and her objectification.”

<sup>10</sup>A recent work is E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). Her discussion of projections of the mother in the films she treats is especially well situated between analysis of the psychoanalytic sphere and a sketching-out of the rapid changes in the cultural representation of mothers and fathers in the 1980s and 1990s. See also *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce

Trebilcot (Savage, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 1983).

<sup>11</sup>The installation was later formulated as a book, *Post-Partum Document* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>14</sup>See Laura Mulvey's anticlassic essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which originally appeared in *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

<sup>15</sup>How differently, indeed, Luce Irigaray reads and refashions the mother-child schema when the child is a girl. See especially "The Gesture in Psychoanalysis," trans. Elizabeth Guild in Brennan, ed., *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, *op. cit.*, 127-38. In this essay, Irigaray is particularly concerned with the differences she discerns between the girl's gestures and the boy's game of *fort-da*, coined by Freud, in which the boy masters his mother's absence. The boy's game is one of throwing out a reel on a string and then drawing it closer again. The mother is made the object of the boy's play, as differentiated from the girl's gestures that attempt "to reproduce around her or inside herself a movement whose energy is circular, and which protects her from dereliction" (133).

<sup>16</sup>Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological Difference," in Brennan, ed., *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, *op. cit.*, 95.

<sup>17</sup>This comment is not meant to negate in any way the real effects the project created for the women who worked on it. The book's section on "Childbirth in America" and its discussion on the way midwives were maneuvered out of the profession are especially useful.

<sup>18</sup>Rosi Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological Difference," in Brennan, ed., *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, *op. cit.*, 97.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>21</sup>Arleen B. Dallery's essay, "The Politics of Writing (The) Body: Écriture Féminine," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, eds. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 52-67 is a particularly lucid and convincing argument for the political strategy of Irigaray's and Hélène Cixous's writing projects. Margaret Whitford, too, has been one of Irigaray's most steadfast interpreters. In her important essay "Rereading Irigaray," in Brennan, ed., *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, *op. cit.*, 106-26, she acknowledges that there are indeed problems with the attempt to use the psychoanalytic conceptual framework to make cultural diagnoses. However, in unacknowledged alignment with Elizabeth Grosz's work on Irigaray, Whitford is in deep accord with Irigaray's project to give sexual difference an ethical and ontological, autonomous status.

<sup>22</sup>Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 238-39.



<sup>23</sup>This English version appears in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1977), 1-7. It was originally published in the *Revue française de psychanalyse*, no. 4 (October–December 1949): 449-55 and is a later reworked version of Lacan’s 1936 essay “Le stade du miroir.”

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>25</sup>See Alphonso Lingis’s translator’s introduction to Levinas’s works cited above (n. 2).

<sup>26</sup>Patricia J. Williams, “On Being the Object of Property,” *Signs* 14.1 (Autumn 1988): 15. Williams’s poignant and powerful essay conjoins personal and rhetorically autobiographical voices with her knowledge of the law field to think the possibilities of rewriting personal property contracts. Such contracts might be flexible enough to respond to racial, class and gender inequalities as well as changing emotions and appreciations of the normally non-remunerated acts of loving and caring for the elderly.

<sup>27</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>29</sup>*Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

<sup>30</sup>This essay was first published in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 80-96. It appeared in an edited form in *Maternal Metaphors*, exhibition catalogue, The Rochester Contemporary, April 30–May 23, 2004.

<sup>31</sup>This exhibition was on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, March 4–July 16, 2007.

<sup>32</sup>*Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).



II.

*Maternal Metaphors I*



# ***Maternal Metaphors I***

Curated by Myrel Chernick

IN THE MID-1990S, AS my video and installation work began to address aspects of maternal subjectivity and ambivalence, I felt isolated in the New York art world and became interested in connecting with artists who shared my interests and concerns. In 1997 I saw Mary Kelly's *Primapara*, created in 1973 during her son's infancy; the close-up, cropped photographs of the baby's face, creases of the ears, the nail clipper on the tiny fingers, were familiar yet unusual images in that they document the mother's experience of the child as she performs a quotidian ritual, constituting an intimate work that expresses the mother's desire. I was stimulated to create an exhibition that questioned, examined, explored and celebrated the passions and frustrations of artist/mothers.

I sought out work that criticized our cultural and social institutions rather than depicted the traditional mother/child dyad, and did not compromise my standards of quality, but encompassed what Susan Suleiman has called a "double allegiance," an allegiance to the contemporary and traditionally male avant-gardes, as well as a critique of dominant sexual ideologies.<sup>1</sup> I attended conferences on feminism and motherhood, met artists who led me to other artists, read journals and magazines, and attended exhibitions. It was not long before I began to locate the kind of artwork that interested me.

I detected certain themes that ran through much of the work that I saw: repetition in the form of multiple objects and series, materials that reflect the mother's potential for harm, and the oscillation in the desire to pictorially represent the mother's and the children's bodies. What these artists also have in common is their deep commitment to making art although they are aware of the difficulties inherent in that choice, as well as their commitment to pushing the boundaries of acceptability.

The exhibit included painting, sculpture, photography, installation and video; approaches to the topic that were humorous, critical, poignant and

theoretical; and featured lesser-known as well as internationally famous artists. It was presented at the Rochester Contemporary Art Center in Rochester, New York, from April 30 to May 24, 2004, and included work by Monica Bock, Myrel Chernick, Renée Cox, Judy Gelles, Judy Glantzman, Rohesia Hamilton Metcalfe, Mary Kelly, Ellen McMahon, Gail Rebhan, Aura Rosenberg, Shelly Silver, Beth Warshafsky, Sarah Webb and Marion Wilson.

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<sup>1</sup>Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Introduction." *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), xvii.



Installation views, Rochester Contemporary 2004.

Top, clockwise from left: Judy Gelles, Monica Bock, Marion Wilson, Sarah Webb, Aura Rosenberg, Judy Glantzman, Renée Cox. Bottom: Sarah Webb, Marion Wilson, Judy Glantzman, Renée Cox, Myrel Chernick, Ellen McMahon.



Installation views, Rochester Contemporary 2004. Top: Mary Kelly, *Primipara*.  
Bottom, from left: Sarah Webb, Marion Wilson, Aura Rosenberg, Judy Glantzman.



MATERNAL METAPHORS I



Installation views, Rochester Contemporary 2004. Top: Sarah Webb, Aura Rosenberg  
Bottom: Judy Glantzman, Renée Cox.



Installation view, Rochester Contemporary 2004. Myrel Chernick.

ELLEN McMAHON



*Suckled v*, from series 1996–2004. Charcoal on Rives BFK, 20 × 13 inches.

This body of work, made while my children were young, is about the politics of intimacy and the tension between the desire to merge and the struggle to separate, which has always been central to my experience as a mother and a daughter. It is informed by my daily experience of mothering in relation to the social category of mother, constructed as natural and thus simultaneously romanticized and undervalued. I'm interested in expressing the pleasure, the humor, the ambivalence, and the resentment that are mixed up in my sense of powerless responsibility and bonded to the prevailing discourse of maternal sacrifice.

We are staying at my  
mother's beach house for the month  
of August. Alice is fifteen and not really in the  
mood for the annual family vacation. One morning as  
everyone else is getting ready for the beach Alice pulls me aside  
and fixes me with her most urgent look. She has an idea but needs  
assistance to pull it off. I'm her best (and only) hope. "Mom, I want  
you to help me with something but you can't tell me that I can't do any-  
thing or ask a lot of questions." Okay, I say. "What kinds of writing can you  
do?" she asks. "Well, I can write in script, print in all caps or upper and lower  
case, and do this sort of formal all caps lettering with serifs." "Show me," she says.  
I write samples on a piece of paper and she decides my writing is good enough. We  
go to the upstairs bedroom, which is small, airless and humid. It must be 100  
degrees. She brings some markers and a notebook of her writing and tells me where  
she wants each one of the words and phrases to go: "Life" and "death" on the bottoms  
of her feet; "Something poisonous delicious forbidden" on her lower back; "I was  
dying but inside her I lived" on her stomach. She takes various poses and art directs  
me as I take the pictures (four rolls of film for the next couple of hours). For  
moments I detach enough to be utterly absorbed in my job but most of the time I  
alternate between feeling like she's taken me hostage and feeling like I've invaded  
her privacy in some way that a 'good mother' would never do. Somewhere there  
is another feeling that makes my chest ache that she would trust me enough to  
have me help her like this. We take a break and I see our reflection in the  
mirror, me at the edge of my maternal capacity and her on top of the  
world. I am holding the camera so I take the shot. Later that evening  
before dinner she is leaning proudly on the kitchen counter  
scantly dressed still in her body writing. The rest of  
the family is unusually quiet. My mother raises  
an eyebrow, shakes her head, and  
bites her lip.



*Alice's Idea*, 2002. Gelatin silver print and text, 16 × 22.5 inches.

ELLEN McMAHON



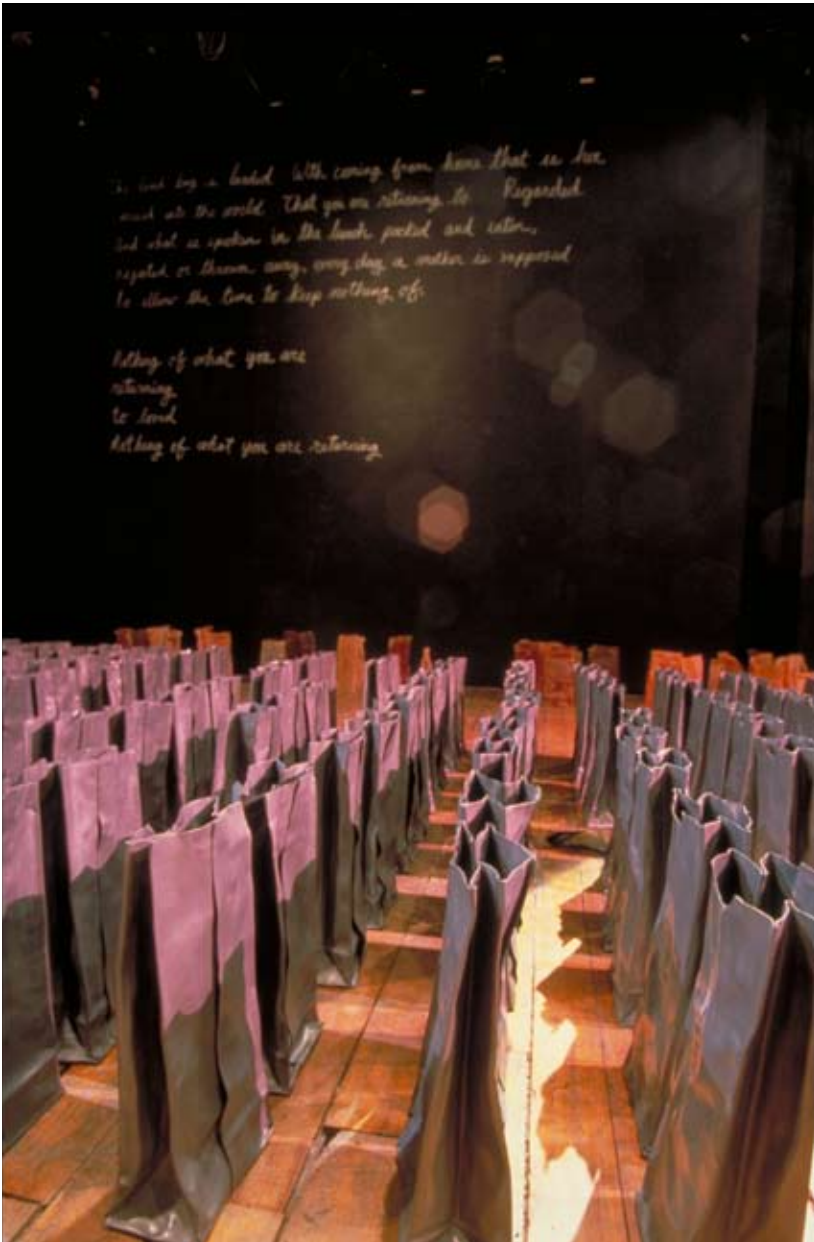
*Sucked II*, from series 1996–2004. Charcoal on Rives BFK, 20 × 13 inches.

MONICA BOCK



*Maternal Exposure  
(don't forget the  
lunches), 1999–  
2000. Folded sheet  
lead, cast glycerin,  
hand-chalked wall  
text by Zofia Burr.  
Bags @ approx.  
11 × 5 × 3 inches.  
Detail, left.*

As an artist I'm interested in the life of the body. With my sculpture and installation, I reflect but also resist the loss to which bodies are subject. Of influence is the proximity in my experience of religious reliquaries and medical specimen cases, of ecstatic saints and flayed cadavers, of promised eternity and matter-of-fact death. I conflate sacred, scientific and domestic forms in work that is often based on castings of the body and of found objects. I use ephemeral substances such as salt and soap, as well as apparently durable materials such as porcelain and iron. My cross-disciplinary projects include photography, sound, performance and poetry. Thematically, my work has focused on the ordinary extremes of maternal life.



*Maternal Exposure (don't forget the lunches)*, 1999–2000. Folded sheet lead, cast glycerin, hand-chalked wall text by Zofia Burr. Bags @ approx. 11 × 5 × 3 inches.





*Sunday News (Daughter)*, 2001. Lead frame, newspaper clipping, antique doily, baby teeth.  
Frame: 1.75 × 1.375 inches.



*Sunday News (Mother)*, 2001 (detail). Lead frames, newspaper clipping, sterling silver, gold-capped molar. Installation 3 × 5 × .25 inches. Large frame: 1.375 × 1.125 inches.

## RENÉE COX



*Yo Mama's Last Supper*, 1996 (detail). Digital photograph, dimensions variable.

Renée Cox has used her own body, both nude and clothed, to celebrate black womanhood and criticize a society she often views as racist and sexist. In her *Yo Mama* series, Cox depicts herself pregnant and postpartum, breastfeeding her child, holding her child, or relaxing in the nude at home. The photograph that created the most controversy was *Yo Mama's Last Supper*. It is a remake of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* with a nude Cox sitting in for Jesus Christ, surrounded by black disciples and a white Judas. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani protested the photograph on the grounds of decency while Cox responded with a jibe at his own public infidelity.



*Yo Mama*, 1993. Gelatin silver print, 80 × 49 inches.



*Yo Mama the sequel*, 1995. Gelatin silver print, 85 × 49 inches.



*Yo Mama at home*, 1993. Gelatin silver print, 48 × 48 inches.

JUDY GELLES



Oct 5, 1977

*We were up all night again. David had an ear infection, and Jason kept waking up complaining that his foot hurt. It's been 3 1/2 years now since we've had a full night's sleep without interruptions.*

*Bedroom Oct. 5, 1977, reprinted 2004. Iris print, 20 × 24 inches.*

I began in 1977. As a young mother of two sons, I was caught in the nexus of feminism, motherhood, finding a career and developing as an artist. I used autobiographical stories to depict subtle ways we were taught to be male and female in our culture. Text was used not to simply describe but to add another layer to the work. My intent was, and still is, to show that reality is not hard and simple but multi-leveled and fragile, that persons in complex societies tend to have multiple roles, and that there are discrepancies between appearances and reality.

In "Florida Portrait Series" I have photographed my family in the same fixed pose for over twenty-five years, commenting on the constancy and mutability of the photographic image and about growth, maturation, death and generations.

In "Family Ties: Three Generations," the passage of time is a thread running through the work; how things change, and how they stay the same. We all collect and keep things to stay connected to our past and to our families. Three generations of family artifacts have been paired to create a unique form of portraiture and provide social commentary on our lives. The diptychs offer new historical identities and help us think about the future.

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Top: Florida 1982. Bottom: Florida 2007. Reprinted 2008. Iris prints, 7 × 7 inches.



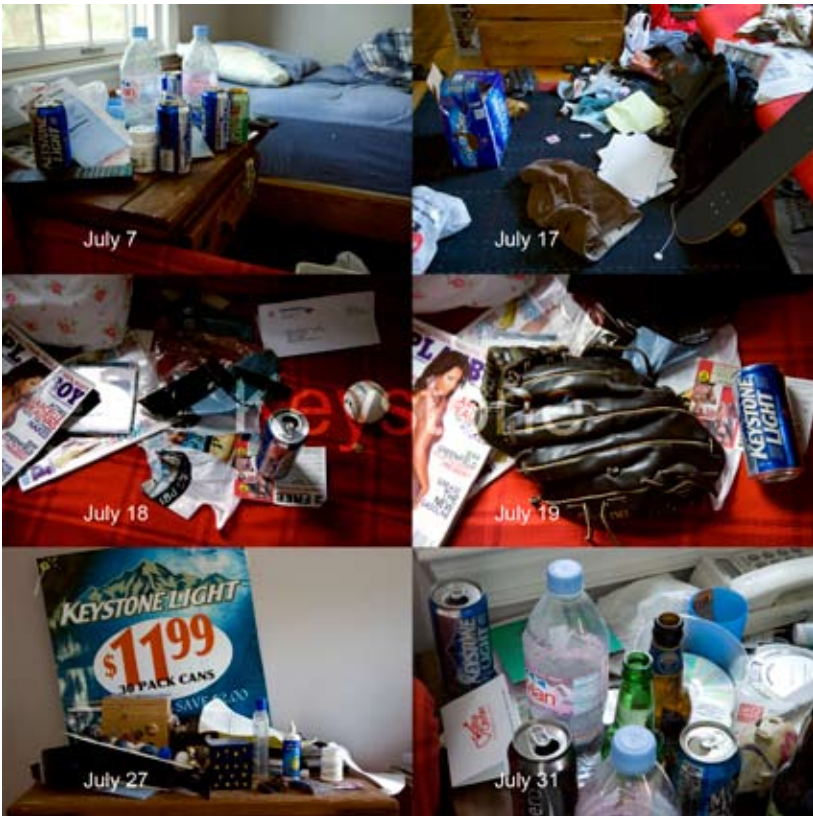
Top: *Horses* 1955-1985. Bottom: *Coats* 1952-2002, 2007.  
Archival pigment print, 28 × 31 inches.



GAIL REBHAN



Above: From the artist's book, *Twenty-One* (page 5). Below: From the artist's book, *Twenty-One* (page 10). 8 × 9.5 inches. On demand printing by Blurb.com.



From the *Room* series (Keystone), 2007. Laminated Giclee print, 40 × 40 inches.

The focus of my work is family. I use my family (and myself) as typical representatives of quotidian, middle-class, American family life. I draw on my own experiences to create art that puts this into a social, cultural, and emotional context. In the early artwork, the act of mothering is overt, as I try to instill my values in my sons. As they grow older, that becomes harder as they engage in typical challenging behavior. The artwork reflects changing family dynamics. Through gentle humor and without didacticism, I examine inconsistencies, faults and problematic behaviour as reflected in family life.



Above: *Baby 2*. Below: *Baby 3*, 1987–1988. Silver gelatin print, 16 × 20 inches.

## MARION WILSON



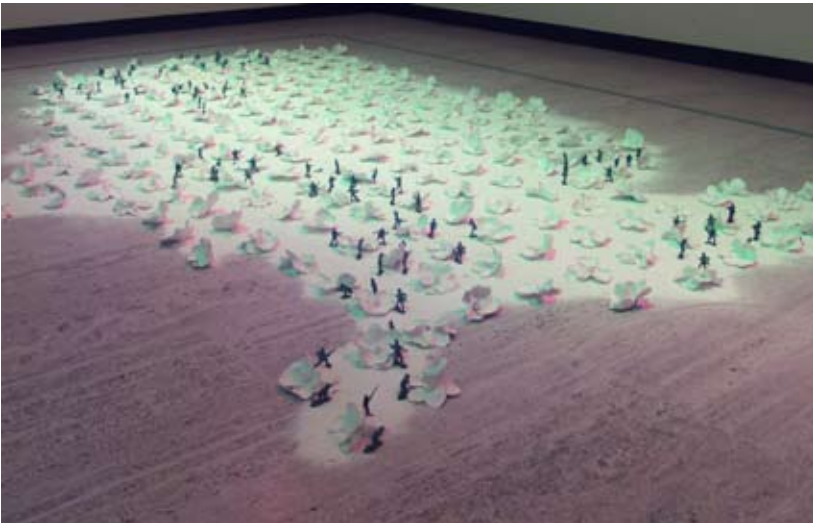
*Guns for Newborns*, 1998. Cast bronze on steel base, each gun is  $4 \times 1 \times 2$  inches.

From 1995 to 2001 my work explored the connection between masculinity and aggression as it manifests itself in the activity of play, looking at the human personality from birth. Working in the permanent and historical medium of bronze, I created monuments and artifacts of war and masculinity while purposely critiquing and domesticating the medium by casting lace, blankets, bubble wrap and dolls to talk about feelings of ambivalence and flux. This body of work culminated in a solo installation called *Playing War* at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center in Buffalo in April 1999, where I reconstructed a medieval arms and armor room on the scale of a toddler while thinking about the subjective and interpretive nature of museum display. In the same way that the three marching baby soldiers are heroic in their efforts to walk and horrifying in being dressed for battle, the horses, chariot and helmets are ironic in their grandeur and vulnerability. My work is inspired by the experience of mother-as-witness as I raise my first son, schoolyard play, and violence towards children on the part of children, both real and imagined.

The newer digital prints and video, *and he was made flesh*, are created by virtually layering images of my sculptures with surgical photographs of interiors of the body, raising questions about reality and fantasy. *Playing War* links the ancient with the contemporary to create a weird world of corruption, fantasy and irony. It questions gender identity, pop culture and accepted codes of behavior that enlist young boys into an imaginary world of guns and warplay.



Above: *Blusing Yaksa*, 2003.  
Right: *The Grand Thaumaturge*, 2003.  
Bronze with patina, 24 × 8 × 8 inches.



Top: *Playing War* Video Still, 2000. 3 minutes long. Bottom: *Pistils vs. Stamens*, 1999–2002. Plaster dust, toy soldiers, colored lights, 10 × 12 feet.

AURA ROSENBERG



*Mike Kelly / Carmen, 1996. C-print, 40 × 30 inches.*

Dressing up, disguise and masquerade are all ways that children test the prospect of identity. My photo project *Who am I? What am I? Where am I?* is a collection of seventy portraits that uses this as its starting point. In each, I worked with a child and another artist. These works became three-way collaborations, based on play. While for children play is to learn, perhaps art offers adults a chance to play. In turn, artists are identified by their work. In these portraits, not only did the children get a different glimpse of themselves, but also many artists came away with a renewed sense of play. In this way, I ending up creating a social and artistic archive, something that now spans twelve years and the work of over eighty artists.



*Fred Tomaselli / Desi, 2007. Archival Digital Inkjet print, 40 × 30 inches.*





*Moyra Davey / Barney, 2008. Archival Digital Inkjet print, 40 × 40 inches.*



*Matt Mullican / Lucy & Cosmo, 2007. Archival Digital Inkjet print, 30 × 40 inches.*

JUDY GLANTZMAN



*A Valentine for Lila*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 80 × 70 inches.

The whimsical and dark characters that occupy my work come from my imagination. Through drawing, painting and sculpting, I concentrate on realizing these imaginary characters. My impulses reveal themselves to me without a preconceived plan, or time to second guess. Impulse allows me to bypass the literal to a reality that is perpetually changing, one form into the other, like the tenuous link to our past, our ancestors, and our humanity.



*She Juggles*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 36 × 36 inches.



*Untitled*, 1996.  
Super Sculpey.  
Top: 9 × 4 × 3 inches.  
Bottom: 6.25 × 8 × 10  
inches.



*Untitled (Crown of Thorns)*, 2004. Oil on canvas, 80 × 70 inches.

