

Essay:

Part 1: 'Matrescence'

Curated by Catherine McCormack

15 November – 21 December 2019

Private view: Thursday 14 November, 6–8pm

Looking reveals the unthinkable: a body labouring in birth and attended to by many hands, writhing not in pain but in what looks like pleasure. Hermione Wiltshire's appropriated image of *Therese in Ecstatic Childbirth* (2008) taken from the radical midwife Ina May Gaskin's guide to spiritual midwifery confounds the expected image of a body giving birth – not least because it is so dramatically removed from the expected clinical environment of control as a crisis to be managed, with the body of the mother rendered into a passive subject in pain. But more than this, it explicitly unveils a moment rarely glimpsed or countenanced, neither in the history of art, contemporary art or wider visual culture. It is the physical and animal reality of how we all entered the world and yet is a subject that art and visual culture has tended to neglect.

Wiltshire's image depicts a moment of transformation when one body opens up to produce another in the passage from oblivion inside the womb to consciousness on the other side. But visualising birth importantly also reveals a moment of transformation for that labouring body – as one that is also remade, both psychically and physically, in the process of becoming a 'mother'. But there is more to mothering than giving birth. In fact, the very word 'mother' is filled with so many expectations and assumptions that too neatly gloss over and contain the diverse and often unspoken range of maternal experience – of joy, rage, trauma, pleasure, obsolescence, grief, ambivalence and ecstasy. At the same time our use of the words 'motherhood', 'maternal' and 'mothering' continue to drown under the weight of pre-conceived and over determined associations.

With this in mind, the title of this group show sidesteps these weighted terms in favour of the concept of '*Matrescence*', an anthropological concept first expressed by Dana Raphael in 1973 but which remains little known. It reframes the somewhat fixed preconceptions of motherhood to suggest instead a sense of physical and psychological processes characterised by unresolved, sometimes conflicting transformations. What else could the act of doubling one's body and labouring for that new body to be born be if not conflicted and unresolved? *Matrescence* marks the first edition of a two-part group show with work that offers a different understanding of maternal experience as something open to transformation beyond the persistent archetypes that have dominated our collective cultural understanding and expectations. By bringing together an international range of contemporary works in dialogue with an older generation of artists represented by Richard Saltoun, this first show addresses three key curatorial themes concerning maternal embodiment and the politics of reproduction, and of images.

The first theme is concerned with reframing archetypal depictions of mothers and of birth. A number of works in *Matrescence* explicitly dethrone the ideal of sacrosanct motherhood, inherited from Christian art in the form of the Virgin Mary. For example, Jo Spence's '*Remodelling Photo History: Revisualisation*' (1981-82) presents a monumental mother body in middle age with pendulous natural breasts, with which she nurses an adult

male on her lap. This photograph brings together two distinct visual formats of idealised mothering from centuries of Christian art; these are the archetypes of the ‘Madonna and Child’ (often seen breastfeeding the infant Jesus); and the *Pietà*, which depicts the dead body of Christ on his mother’s lap. Seen in these terms, the dominant visual images of idealised motherhood in Christian images have limited the visibility of mothers to two moments – the birth and death of her child, reducing maternal subjectivity to the states of care-giving and grief while leaving all other lived experience unexplored. Spence subverts these traditional images of idealised mothering as part of her wider project to draw attention to the limited roles of self-identification for women within our shared canons of images. ‘*Remodelling Photo History: Revisualisation*’ depicts a ‘maternal’ body that conforms neither to the religious archetype of the young, beautiful virgin mother, nor to contemporary normative ‘beauty’ standards. In such it queries the social anxieties around the visibility of mother bodies and what is considered appropriate and normal – whether that is the heavily concealed body of the Madonna, or women breastfeeding in public. Spence is one of the artists represented in *Matrescence* who did not have children, but who was nevertheless interested in the feminist politics of mothering and child care as well as rethinking representations of domestic life and children. These inclusions are vital to illustrate how the representation of maternal experience goes well beyond the personal, subjective experiences of individual ‘artist mothers’ to broach the politics of maternity in wider discussions of capitalism and patriarchy. Spence’s work around this theme with *The Hackney Flashers* will also feature in *Maternity* opening on 10th January 2020.

Leni Dothan’s looped films *Sleeping Madonna* (2011), and *Mine* (2012) also respond to the ideological coding of women’s roles in familiar religious archetypes of mothering, particularly the Renaissance altarpieces that depict Mary as a patient, beautiful and subservient young woman – images that continue to be revered in art history as triumphant examples of beauty and artistic skill. Dothan has theorised these works as ‘visual contracts’ that enforce women’s submissive social and emotional behaviour, and aims to expose the disparity between idealised presentations of mothering and the lived reality of maternal experience. For example, *Sleeping Madonna* animates the cold still of the devotional image, exposing it as the constructed pose of a model within a staged setting. Using the artist’s own body and the body of her son, the work visualises the everyday ennui and exhaustion of breastfeeding and reproductive labour in the exchanges between mother and child, but which are often suppressed beneath an outward veneer of controlled perfection.

In Dothan’s looped film *Mine*, the artist-as-mother/mother-as-artist is seen removing a knife from her child’s reach, who keenly wants something that he doesn’t know might harm him. It is a complex work that envisions the anxiety of maternal love – a love that exists in the traumatic knowledge that death may take back from the mother what she has given life to in the form of her child. Even when the two bodies lovingly embrace, the knife always glistens above them as a reminder that danger can never be eradicated – despite the mother’s emotional and physical struggle to confront it, she succeeds in only ever holding it at arm’s length. The work visualises the limitations of maternal power in the mother’s efforts to protect her child from external threats, but also implies that this struggle also involves potentially protecting the child from herself. In such, *Mine* addresses some of the complex taboos at the heart of maternal experience in reminding us that to mother is to take on a freighted role in which the capacity to harm those in one’s care (intentionally or otherwise) is as present as the power to assiduously protect them.

The complexity of Dothan's *Mine* has been adopted by scholars from the fields of both philosophy and theology who have been interested in the way the artist recasts narratives from scripture.¹ For example, *Mine* is also an intentional reworking of the Old Testament narrative of the 'Binding of Isaac', a theme that has been central to Hebraic literature and regularly depicted in Western art, from Rembrandt to Caravaggio. According to the scripture, Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son to God in order to prove his absolute devotion, but when Isaac was about to die at the hands of his father, an angel intervened to save the child. *Mine* – which was exhibited at the Jewish Museum in London in 2015 – envisions this Old Testament story from the position of the mother (who is absent from the biblical narrative). Dothan transfers the setting to a contemporary family bedroom without godly intervention or angels to ask us to reflect on the reality of what that sacrifice might entail at the hands of the mother. While the biblical narrative permits the father to commit to murdering the child, *Mine* reveals how retelling patriarchal foundational stories from a female perspective and with female protagonists shifts the emotional responses to the work.

Elzbieta Jablonska's series *Supermother* (2002) strikes another note on these themes. Already adopted by recent feminist art histories, this series is on show for the first time in London, and reimagines the iconic image of the enthroned Madonna and Child – exploring its influence on gender stereotypes in her native Poland as a role model for Polish women devoted to religion and to the domestic sphere of chores and child-care. Jablonska juxtaposes the masculine figure of the superhero with a quotidian domestic setting, and in doing so both elevates and satirizes the inescapably insurmountable roles of domestic labour that characterise child-rearing, by suggesting it is a pursuit that only a superhuman could manage. By appearing in her own work as both mother figure and artist (like Leni Dothan), Jablonska invites a consideration of *creative* versus *procreative* labour which is an important rationale underpinning these group shows. After all, the mid twentieth-century critic Cyril Connolly's haunting phrase 'there is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall', has served as a means of frustrating the possibility that women can be both mothers and artists, especially if their art draws on maternal experience. Jablonska, like a number of artists in this two-part show, brings the politics of the domestic sphere (a space that has been designated as 'feminine') into a fine art or conceptual art context. This can be read as a continuation of 1970s art practice aligned with the Women's Movement that re-thought feminised labour within the home.

To understand what it is to 'mother' we must equally also know what it means to 'un-mother', or 'non-mother' through choice or otherwise, which leads to another curatorial thread of 'public and private' – with mother's bodies the focus of both personal and political concerns. Human reproduction is governed by biopolitical regimes across the world that control women's access to abortion, rights to assisted fertility procedures, or even where they can labour in birth and with whom, begging the question as to how much of our reproductive lives really are free. A selection of images from Laia Abril's 2018 installation and photobook *On Abortion* (shortlisted for the 2019 Deutsche Börse Photography prize) visualises the personal stories and mapped routes, both psychological and geographical, that women in Poland have had to negotiate in seeking a termination to their pregnancies. These envisage another type of 'matrescence', as the testimonies of these 'photo novels' suggest permanent transformation in terms of self-identity and personal relationships as a result of abortion procedures. Elsewhere

¹ Aaron Rosen, *Brushes With Faith: Reflections and Conversations on Contemporary Art* (Cascade Books, Oregon), 2019.

in this selection, a macabre black and white image of handcuffs dangling on a hospital bed entitled *Hippocratic Betrayal* shot with the intensity of crime scene reportage relates to a particular case of a 19 year old girl who was detained and handcuffed in a São Paulo hospital by doctors when she arrived seeking medical care after taking illegal abortion pills. At the heart of this project is the artist's desire to draw political attention to the deaths of 47,000 women per year as a result of unsafe illegal abortion procedures as well as the ethics of patriarchal states across the globe that charge women with homicide and imprison them if they have an abortion, or in some cases, a miscarriage.

Just as the right to end pregnancy is denied to many women across the world, so is access to assisted fertility procedures for others in another public control of personal choice. Xiao Lu's work *Sperm* (2006), shown for the first time in the UK, is a performance installation comprising a video and archival photograph from the artist's performance-installation at the Kanga Hotel in Yang'an, China in 2006. As an unmarried woman, the artist was not eligible for IVF treatment. Furthermore, the performance took place during a period in which state-issued birth permission certificates were necessary for all Chinese births, whether through intercourse or IVF (and which were issued only to married couples). During the performance Xiao Lu held a discussion about reproduction before inviting members of the audience to donate sperm samples for her to use in an attempt to impregnate herself through in-vitro fertilisation. Had it been successful, this would have resulted in conception as the culmination of the performance as the artist had found a Western doctor who was willing to carry out the procedure, but the artist received no contributions.

Sperm offers a different way of reflecting on the centrality of the mother body as a site for both artistic creation and procreation, and in its very title also reintroduces the presence of male bodies into the subject of mothering and reproduction. In such it raises issues about the necessity and the erasure of male identity in reproductive debates that very often focus solely on women's bodies. Xiao Lu made public a process that is often veiled in closely guarded privacy, but which reveals the power of state influenced societal views around the morality of reproduction outside of hetero-normative marriages, where a public institution (the State) controls the private lives and family aspirations of individuals

A 'triptych' of images of birthing bodies comprising of works by Eve Arnold, Hermione Wiltshire and Helen Chadwick introduces the idea of 'maternity and obscenity' and returns to the issues concerned with the visibility of mother bodies. Wiltshire's appropriated photograph of *Therese in Ecstatic Childbirth* (2008) is a response to the artist's exploration into how the real experience of the moment of crowning in childbirth remains shrouded in mystery and invisibility – even from expectant mothers for fear of traumatising them. From the Women's Movements of the 1970s onwards feminists have tried to reclaim women's rights to knowledge and access to their own bodies particularly in cases of their reproductive lives – an issue vocalised in the influential 1970 publication 'Our bodies, Ourselves'. Despite this, unassisted birth in non-medicalised environments continues to be a 'radical' practice that has been policed and widely condemned, even made effectively illegal in a number of countries.

The photograph is an appropriation of an un-staged snapshot of 'orgasmic birth' – a phenomenon that dramatically rewrites the standard narrative of birth as something agonising, and reframes the maternal body in a position of empowering pleasure. However, the work has had a controversial history of display in its home at the Birth Rites Collection in London, from where it is on loan. Deemed to be 'too shocking' – even for display in the midwifery department of a teaching hospital – the image has been repeatedly censored. For

in witnessing Therese and her ecstatic childbirth we are compelled to look (but also to look away) from this explicit view that presents birth as unexpectedly pornographic, and even obscene. Although the work has been adopted by feminists as a powerful and necessary reclaiming of sexuality for mother bodies, it also draws on something beyond this seeming impossibility to imagine a suppressed maternal sexuality. Perhaps we are too ready to label this birthing body as pornographic, because images have taught us that female bodies experiencing pleasure must always, can only, be of a sexual nature. *Therese* disrupts our understanding of what we symbolically understand in looking at bodies of women. Its inflammatory power takes us closer to a deeper, darker, psychic imaginary about women's bodies, something perhaps more akin to French feminist writer Hélène Cixous's concept of '*jouissance*', her rethinking of Jacques Lacan's term to describe sensory excesses such as pleasure and pain. For Cixous, *jouissance* can be understood as a female pleasure that goes beyond bodily satisfaction to become a 'fusion of the erotic, mystical and political', and sees it as a source of female power that has been suppressed to disempower women's voices.²

Seen in this way, Wiltshire's *Therese* can also be seen as a work that aligns marginalised feminist art practices of rewriting female experience, with a marginalised radical midwifery that centres on women's bodies and which is routinely held at a distance from the patriarchal tradition doctor-led obstetrics. It is, for example, a contrast to Eve Arnold's black and white image *Birth* (1952) that represents the conventional visual depiction of childbirth as firmly controlled by the obstetrician. Here, cloaked in the sacramental garments of the clinic, the doctor hoists the baby up like a captured trophy while the mother's identity is rendered anonymous. She is seen only as the back of a well-coiffed hairstyle, as a hand grasping the side of the bed, her body enveloped in a whitewash of hygienic, unstained sheets. It is one in which all the unsettling animality and materiality of the birthing mother is held at bay, in which the start of life means an immediate rupture and denial from the body that created it. Completing the 'triptych' is Helen Chadwick's intentionally grotesque *Birth of Barbie* (1993) in which the plastic doll that represents Western culture's accepted model of femininity is birthed from a lump of raw and bloody meat. If we find it hard to look at 'Therese' in ecstatic childbirth, then Chadwick's photograph asks us what sorts of female bodies we really are comfortable with consuming.

The theme of the monstrous or augmented and alien pregnant female body is further explored in two works from the 1970s feminist avant-garde. Renate Bertlmann's still from her 1978 performance '*Die Schwangere Braut im Rollstuhl*' ('the pregnant bride in wheelchair') envisages a different type of monster – one that has overstepped the designated categories of female identity in patriarchal social structures. The image of the pregnant bride interrupts the illusion of virginity as a social and economic commodity that was the symbolic and ritual identity of the bride in the white gown. The performance took place in the Modern Art Gallery of Vienna, with the artist dressed in white dress and veil wearing a mask and holding a bridal wreath, both of which are made with the teats of baby pacifiers. At a certain point in the performance the pregnant bride 'gave birth' to a tape recorder wrapped in bandages which played a recording of a baby crying which had been concealed beneath the dress. Annegret Soltau's *Schwanger I* [Pregnant I], (1978) shows an example of her experiments with thread and stitching over photographs to create what she has described as an alternative form of

² Sandra M. Gilbert, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clement, trans. Betsy Wing, *The Newly Born Woman*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

drawing and a 'haptic line'. The stitched collage *Schwanger I* shows an example of a pregnant body as one that interrupts the conventional presentation of the female nude. It introduces the idea of a re-fashioned, troubling and conflicted body that has split and reproduced in unexpected and unruly ways. Soltau's work on the materiality of maternal bodies will be taken up for further examination in the second instalment of the exhibition in January.

Helen Knowles's *A szülés természete (The Natural Way of Birth)* (2012) draws on this theme of the public and private imaginaries of reproduction and birthing within state discourses of power and also returns us to the topic of birth, sexuality and obscenity. Whereas on first glance the image seems to show a couple having sex while another watches on, it is actually an image appropriated from a home birth video uploaded onto YouTube. Like *Therese in Ecstatic Childbirth* it reveals the unexpected proximity between a body experiencing labour and images we have become used to associating with bodies experiencing sexual pleasure. This opens up the discussion of maternal sexuality and the uses of social media channels to democratise experiences that are generally shrouded from visibility – or the reverse, querying if actual real-life experience has been replaced by life lived online, even the act of giving birth. The highly pixelated image loses focus on closer viewing and conveys a sense of something that slides in and out of view, of appearance and disappearance. This communicates in some way the embodied experience of giving birth as something never fully tangible that is difficult to express in the symbolic terms we have available. The attendant obstetrician whose white capped head can be seen in the foreground also brings another angle to the politics of public state regulation around birth; this is the head of Ágnes Géreb, the Hungarian obstetrician and home birth advocate and activist, who was imprisoned during a period in which it was illegal for medical professionals to attend to women birthing at home, a state policy that has only very recently been overturned.

Liv Pennington's *Private View* (2006), is a pivotal work that touches on many of the show's themes. It is the result of a performance in London, where forty women were invited to take a pregnancy test when visiting the bathroom of the private view of an art exhibition. The artist broadcast the anonymous results of each test in public, on a screen above the bar at the event and collected quotes from the participants once they had performed the test. Photographs of the tests along with the recorded responses were then put together to make a composite print, with the ubiquitous circle, square and thin blue lines of the standard home pregnancy kit arranged in a grid formation.

As a work it invites many reflections both on the nature of art production, and the visibility and materiality of pregnant bodies. There is the disconnect between the private setting of 'performing' a pregnancy test and sharing the results publicly, when the identity of women as mothers is not yet detectable to the public gaze. There is the semiotic richness of the geometric shapes of the pregnancy test communicating results that tend to inspire strong feelings of joy or panic. Seen here in grid formation in Pennington's print, these shapes seem to imitate the pictorial language of twentieth-century artists such as Piet Mondrian and Ben Nicholson whose geometric abstraction has conditioned our understanding of modernist painting as something that self-consciously rejected narrative and emotional content. The circles, squares and blue lines of *Private View* problematise this understanding of geometric abstraction by returning us fully to the material indexes of the bodies in the performance, and the individual cocktails of chemicals and hormones that condition the outcome of each test – not just in terms of detecting a pregnancy but, as can be seen in the composite print, each test varies in colour and tone. In such, each test can be seen as something akin to a 'portrait', of the mother body, or the new pregnancy, or the inseparability of both. This then opens up a

range of other issues to do with foetal identity, which is a vivid debate within legal discussions about the criminalisation of abortion. Overall, *Private View* reveals the potential for the mother body as a complex artistic medium, able to mimic the pictorial language of art history as much as it can sustain new life. Pennington's *Private View* performance will be repeated on the occasion of the private view opening of the '*Matrescence*' show on 14 November 2019.

If '*Matrescence*' is a group show about transitions, then within this we can also consider the transformative potential of art and images in bringing to the surface those aspects of the mother paradigm that cannot be voiced, and cannot be contained. By rethinking aspects of the maternal and mothering we can use this as a means of rethinking our politics as well as our confrontation with complexity, matter and materiality – a subject which paves the way for the next instalment of the show in January 2020 titled '*Maternity*'. This next instalment takes as inspiration the etymological root of the Latin word for mother ('mater') – which is shared with the word 'matter' - meaning the physical substances, or fabric of the universe from which everything originates.

Maternal politics affects all of us: men, women, children, those who have given birth or not. It is therefore a human issue and not a women's one. This ambitious two-part show aims to open up some of our current and persistent issues concerning maternal experience for discussion, but is aware of its limitations and the possibilities for expansion to address. These include the comparative erasure of non-normative bodies and ethnically diverse bodies and experiences within maternal images, as well as the possibility for rethinking mothering as an ungendered practice.

Catherine McCormack, Autumn 2019.