



M/E/A/N/I/N/G

An
Anthology of
Artists' Writings,
Theory, and
Criticism

SUSAN BEE AND MIRA SCHOR, EDITORS with a foreword by Johanna Drucker

has them—but there are great rewards. Thanks, kids. Thanks, husband. That Nick and India are attractive, well adjusted, accomplished adults makes choosing and living our priorities worthwhile.

Suzanne Anker

Mothers of Invention

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow,
tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm.
speeding up or slowing down.
Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable,
there is an other. And no one is present,
within that simultaneous and alien space,
to signify what is going on. “It happens,
but I’m not there.” “I cannot realize it but it goes on.”
Motherhood’s impossible syllogism.
—Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*

Within the cultural body lies another corpus, the unwritten textual authority determining the value of flesh . . . its color, pigment, muscular tone, gender, age. As a laboratory defines specimens, so does the power-at-large form a taxon of its constituents, through classification systems of identity and taboo. That great mystery, motherhood, is at once glorified and shunned. Creativity is not shut out by motherhood, nor is it usurped by it. Essentialist arguments defining women by and through their bodies can of course be developed in Wittgenstein’s terms: where the meaning of a thing is concomitant with its use. However, when singular definitions are reexamined and opened to include identity beyond biology, identity is revealed as *constructed* rather than determined. Only then is the meaning of women extended to include functions of motherhood as well as characteristics not connected with it.

Creativity emerges from everywhere. Everywhere, including motherhood. Metamorphosis and transformation are not strangers to women whose bodies change several times over the course of their lives . . . the development of breasts, the inauguration of the menarche. As artists we watch our work outwardly transmute, we follow the evolution of our

ideas, its ontogeny. So too as mothers, we experience a recognition of the body, not in terms of vesselized genotypes, but in terms of alterity and transfiguration. Motherhood is not reducible to a single activity. Its nature changes with age, circumstances, culture. Even as an archetype it is mutable. Motherhood is difficult, protracted. So are identity and selfhood, as such, regardless of gender. As individuated subject, woman forms the locus of a career, developing and exchanging systemic controls and expenditures. These activities of motherhood and creative work are certainly more alike than different, more connected than separate.

Both the woman artist and the mother operate in constricted terrains, tracts contaminated by propositions entwined with age-long tales of social and determinist Darwinism. To be a woman artist is *to be* a taboo. Is that not wonder enough? To represent rarity, commodity fetish, *and* anomaly? If such characteristics form the semiotic of aesthetic exchange within political economy then how does it come to pass that these characteristics are of little economic currency when applied to the female of the species? Is it not odd that those very characteristics of the commodity fetish, that is, rarity, unicity, and power do not apply to woman as subject? Answers to these propositions lie in the labyrinth of female identity and its cultural locality.

Women's roles in art production, reproduction, and gender construction operate within a sheltered domain dominated by misogynist fear. "To control women's sexuality and reproduction is the ability to control cultural transmission in general," writes Susan Mizruchi in "Reproducing Women in *The Awkward Age*,"¹ an analysis of Henry James's 1899 novel. With clearcut accuracy, Mizruchi recognizes maternal icons as representations of male desire and control, locates the female voice within an excluded category, which, thus, leaves intact the requirements of culture.² To view motherhood within this proposition keeps cultural autocracy in place. To control women is tantamount to controlling the future. To control motherhood, to constrain it into sanctified space, to objectify it as glorious teleological performance, is only one of the means to reinforce the subservience of the flesh . . . women as flesh factories. That is not to say that motherhood is not a glorious experience. It is. But it is not to be the capital of the reigning power as the predominant avatar of female sensibility and being. Patriarchal culture is heavily invested in the myth of motherhood. Like

the beauty myth, the myth of the Madonna is a double agent, self-censoring its practitioners. The pedestal is a prison.

Artifacts, theses, and precepts, the products of civilization, are conspicuously apparent as projections of the body.³ Double-barreled, ironically, these cultural motifs also form the matrix for agencies of control. As ever present and ambiguous cultural myths, these propositions lie dormant in all cultural institutions and their by-products. By projecting socially constructed values back onto the body, specific power-laden agendas injure science and society, narrowing the possibilities of creativity rather than opening them up. To view women, motherhood, and creativity within this mold is a perversion. Stipulating limited level engagement as a requirement to satisfaction drives, perversion enters functional reality as a meek counterbalance displacing the possibility of a more lucrative quarry of full endowment.

Reproductive technology is swiftly entering the world of motherhood, combining organic processes with electronic and mechanical ones. As power broker, the cultural organ unmistakably and in its own self-interest infuses the biological body with a viral coup d'état. Capturing the cell's nucleus, the cultural body camouflages its own intent, forcing its biological hostage into false and sometimes tortuous acknowledgments. Whereas motherhood, which once was the domain of mystical and religious ideology, now requires the cultural operation of bio-logic: the control of cells, the engineering of organs, the commodity warehouses of spare parts. If evolution is in part our destiny, by bringing indeterminacy and relativity within postmodern scientific practice, then motherhood must be removed from its mechanistic status. If we take science to be an operational truth, then social systems, which are highly reflective of philosophical ones, can reinvent a notion of motherhood corresponding to actual subjective practice. To the contrary, if we do not take science to be operational truth, if we are wedded to more theological concerns, then the relationship between the body, the self, and spirituality are still fertile territories in this ongoing discussion of life. Regardless of one's particular anatomy of belief, questions around motherhood are becoming increasingly complex. Transgenetic species, recombinant DNA, and surrogate wombs have become operational in reproductive technology. Re-viewing motherhood as machine focuses on a future of the cyborg, a scenario grounded in the invention of nature, fusing the artificial with life science.

Andreas Huyssen activates the metaphor of the automaton in “The Vamp and the Machine,” where he writes:

In 1748 the French doctor Julien Offay de la Mettrie, in a book entitled *L’Homme machine*, described the human being as a machine composed of a series of distinct, mechanically moving parts, and he concluded that the body is nothing but a clock, subject as all other matters to the laws of mechanics. Such materialist theories ultimately led to the notion of a blindly functioning world machine, a gigantic automaton, the origins and meaning of which were beyond human understanding. Consciousness and subjectivity were degraded to mere functions of a global mechanism. The determination of social life by metaphysical legitimizations of power was replaced by the determination through the laws of nature. The age of modern technology and its legitimatory apparatuses had begun.⁴

This modernist drama—the control and surveillance of nature—clearly continues its historical ambition, orienting us towards an Enlightenment construction of medicine. Huyssen goes on to say:

Just as man invents and constructs technological artifacts which are to serve him and fulfill his desires, so woman as she has been socially invented and constructed, is expected to reflect man’s need and to serve her master. Woman, in male perspective, is considered to be the natural vessel of man’s reproductive capacity, a mere bodily extension of the male’s procreative powers.⁵

Technological fantasy is the amalgam of origination and manipulation. This fabrication turns desire (and motherhood), as a lathe turns wood, into an accessory of powerlessness. Motherhood’s future carries with it the fallacy of a “maker,” masquerading either as patriarchal religiosity or scientific progress. The formation of a life-begetting organism, the creation of Mother herself, imposes upon us an authoritarian will. The construction of techno-organistic reproduction, not by inheritance, but by deterministic command, employs the sensibility of a militaristic metropolis. (Attention all gametes, roll call!) Egg farming, plastic wombs, in-vitro fertilization, and surrogate habitats are myriad examples of the promise of reproductive technology. By what myths are these covenants propagating and sustaining themselves? Who will benefit from this digitally Darwinized future? Woman must look at this equation to evaluate *her* choice. Who keeps the seeds?

Notes

This article is dedicated to my daughter Jocelyn K. Anker. Special thanks to Christine de Lignieres and Frank Gillette.

The source of the epigraph is Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," p. 237.

- 1 Susan Mizruchi, "Reproducing Women in *The Awkward Age*," *Representations* 38, Spring 1992, pp. 101–30.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 See Elaine Scarry, *The Body In Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- 4 Andrea Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine," *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 69.
- 5 Ibid.

Susan Bee

Breaking Ground

I suppose, thinking back, that in my mind painting and motherhood were always closely associated. My mother Miriam Laufer was a painter and as a child I would sometimes go with her to the studio where I would get a piece of paper and some oil paints and would paint in the corner while she worked. Then, when she started exhibiting in the 1960s in the 10th Street artists co-ops, I would go to the openings with her. So it always seemed to me that the odor of oil paint and turpentine and mother were paired.

Only later when I came to decide myself to have children did I realize how incompatible the rest of the world, especially the art world, find these two phenomena. I think the discrimination against women artists with children is rampant and untalked about. It is assumed that if your womb is active your brain has suddenly shut off. Of course, people expect you to give up your studio (too far away), your work (too physically demanding), and your intellect (not enough blood to the brain). And these assumptions come from dealers, other artists, male and female, and critics and curators. "Surely you're not going to keep