



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination

Betterton, Rosemary.

Hypatia, Volume 21, Number 1, Winter 2006, pp. 80-100 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/hyp/summary/v021/21.1betterton.html>

Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination

ROSEMARY BETTERTON

This paper engages with theories of the monstrous maternal in feminist philosophy to explore how examples of visual art practice by Susan Hiller, Marc Quinn, Alison Lapper, Tracey Emin, and Cindy Sherman disrupt maternal ideals in visual culture through differently imagined body schema. By examining instances of the pregnant body represented in relation to maternal subjectivity, disability, abortion, and “prosthetic” pregnancy, it asks whether the “monstrous” can offer different kinds of figurations of the maternal that acknowledge the agency and potential power of the pregnant subject.

1733 on 10 November with Maryken, wife of the servant to the orphanage. A son. But had a face like an ape. At the back of the neck an opening as big as a hand. Its genitals were also not as they should be. She had seen apes dancing. It did not live long. Oh Lord, save us from such monsters.

—Catherina Schrader

The category of the “other” includes the inhabitants of the realm of supernatural beings and monsters, the territories of real and imagined enemies, and the lands of the dead—places far from the centre of the world, where one’s own land is, and one’s own reality. The other is always distant as well as different,

and against this difference the characteristics of self and society
are formed and clarified.

—Susan Hiller

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 simultaneously
dual and alien space to signify what is going on.
“It happens, but I’m not there.” “I cannot realise it,
but it goes on.” Motherhood’s impossible syllogism.

—Julia Kristeva

In the introduction to her book *The Myth of Primitivism*, artist and anthropologist Susan Hiller defines the “other” as those things against which we define ourselves. But what if that otherness is enclosed in our bodies, as yet unknown, neither friend nor enemy, growing inside our own flesh and blood? Such monstrous imaginings are the stuff of fairy tales and horror films, and yet, an ontological awareness of the body’s alienation from itself and an emergent new relationship with an unfamiliar being is familiar to many pregnant women, as Julia Kristeva’s powerful description suggests.¹ For if the “other” is unknowable and monstrous, it can also be intimate and indeed connected to what makes us most anxious about our bodily selves, disturbing our own sense of reality. It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising that the trope of the monstrous has had close connections with pregnancy as the one of the most embodied, and least rational, of experiences.² In our own biomedical times, miscarriages and birth malformations are routinely ascribed to maternal ill health or genetics, but to our early modern forebears, “monstrous” births were products of a powerful maternal imagination, as the words of eighteenth-century Friesian midwife Catherina Schrader reveal.

In this essay, I argue that pregnancy continues to be haunted by monsters in the Western visual imagination. Following the connection that Kristeva made between the maternal body and abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982), the monstrous maternal has been extensively explored as a figure of horror within science-fiction cinema. Barbara Creed identified the birthing monster in the *Alien* series as the “archaic mother” whose alien materiality threatens to engulf human subjects (Creed 1993).³ Within the mass media, the “celebrity body” of pregnancy is now widely visible (Tyler 2001), while, at the same time, anxieties about artificial technologies of conception and birth have emerged as central

tropes in science-fiction writing and cinema. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which the monstrous maternal body has been represented in other aspects of visual culture. By focusing on the work of visual artists who address themes of maternal subjectivity, disability, abortion, and “prosthetic” pregnancy, I want to open up the question of whether different kinds of aesthetics of the maternal body might be discovered in contemporary art. Working with the concept of the monstrous that feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti articulates in relation to images of the pregnant body which are represented as divided or incomplete yet insistently embodied, I ask whether the divided or incomplete bodies can represent instances of what Braidotti calls a “materialist theory of becoming” (Braidotti 2002, 2). How do these artworks negotiate the relations between the socially constituted maternal body and the particularities of the embodied materiality of pregnancy?⁴ If the pregnant body exceeds regulatory social norms in certain respects, how are these processes of regulation and excess articulated in visual images, and in what ways? And, how do women artists explore the split between self and other as productive pregnant subjects? Contemporary art, I shall suggest, can explore the monstrous through an imaginative reworking of maternal abjection in concrete practices that engage with the embodied *and* imagined agency of maternal subjects.

I begin by putting Braidotti’s theory of the monstrous into dialogue with an artwork by Susan Hiller. Braidotti uses, among others, the figure of the pregnant and birthing subject to explore a differently imagined set of relationships between self and other.⁵ My reading of Hiller’s work *Ten Months* (1977–79), suggests that this radical possibility was anticipated in an early example of feminist art practice that also posed questions about the identity of the pregnant subject within the creative process.

MATERNAL IMAGINATION

In her essay “Signs of Wonder and Traces of Doubt: On Teratology and Embodied Differences” (1996), Braidotti analyses what structures Western cultural discomfort with the pregnant body. She notes the origins of the term *teratos* in its double sense in Greek as that which is both prodigy and demon, evoking fascination and horror and, as such, structurally ambiguous. In this way, Braidotti argues, the monstrous helps organize structures of difference in a same/other binary between what is sacred and mutant, normal and abnormal, whether it be between sexual, racial, or human/nonhuman categories. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, popular and medical belief made frequent links between monstrosity and childbirth: “Monsters are linked to the female body in scientific discourse through the question of biological reproduction. Theories of the conception of monsters are at times extreme versions of the deep-seated anxiety that surrounds the issue of women’s maternal power of procreation in a

patriarchal society” (139). Monstrous births could be linked to women’s sexual excess or perversion, the mixing of different sperm or between different races, intercourse during menstruation, eating forbidden food, or demonic possession—and in a modern twist to the theme, to toxic or genetic damage. The maternal imagination was deemed to have the power to kill or deform the fetus merely through an act of illicit looking: “She had seen apes dancing.”⁶ Women in their maternal function, therefore, had to be disciplined to control their desires for the well being of the unborn child—a regulatory model that persists in contemporary injunctions on pregnant women not to smoke, drink, or take drugs. According to this model, the pregnant woman, like the monster, is split with contradiction: “The female, pregnant body is posited *both* as a protective filter and as a conductor or highly sensitive conveyor of impressions, shocks and emotions. It is both a ‘neural’ and somewhat ‘electrical’ body. There is an insidious assimilation of the pregnant woman to an unstable, potentially sick subject, vulnerable to uncontrollable emotions” (149).

But Braidotti does not see the monstrous as wholly negative. Following Donna Haraway (1992), she discusses “the promises of monsters,” the monster as a productive process: “I would like to propose a re-definition, the monster is a process without a stable object. It makes knowledge happen by circulating, sometimes as the irrational non-object.” (Braidotti 1996, 150). In her recent book, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002), Braidotti develops this argument further, stating her central question as “how to represent mutations, changes and transformations, rather than Being in its classical modes,” and her central aim as finding new figurations of hybrids and monsters as possible models for a “materialist theory of becoming” (2).

I argue here that works of art, like other imaginative practices, can explore the tensions that pregnant bodies evoke through their “mutations, changes and transformations,” and thus offer “new figurations” rather than theoretical closure. A different set of intertwined questions concerns the power of the maternal imagination and how it might be deployed in thinking about the pregnant woman who is simultaneously a creative subject and object. One artwork that addresses the problematic of the pregnant body as a material process of becoming is Hiller’s photographic installation, *Ten Months* (1977–79), a piece made after her first and only pregnancy (Figure 1). It is based on written journal entries and photographs taken during the duration of her pregnancy “as a record of the internal and external changes of that period. As someone who was already a mature artist [I was] aware of the metaphors of creativity that come out of pregnancy” (Hiller 1996, 47–48). The work is in the form of ten horizontal rectangular panels that follow the ten lunar months of pregnancy, each unit made up of a typed text and twenty-eight black and white photographs taken each day of her pregnant belly, “the section of the body you couldn’t talk about, the pregnant part” (49). At first sight, the installation appears to be an

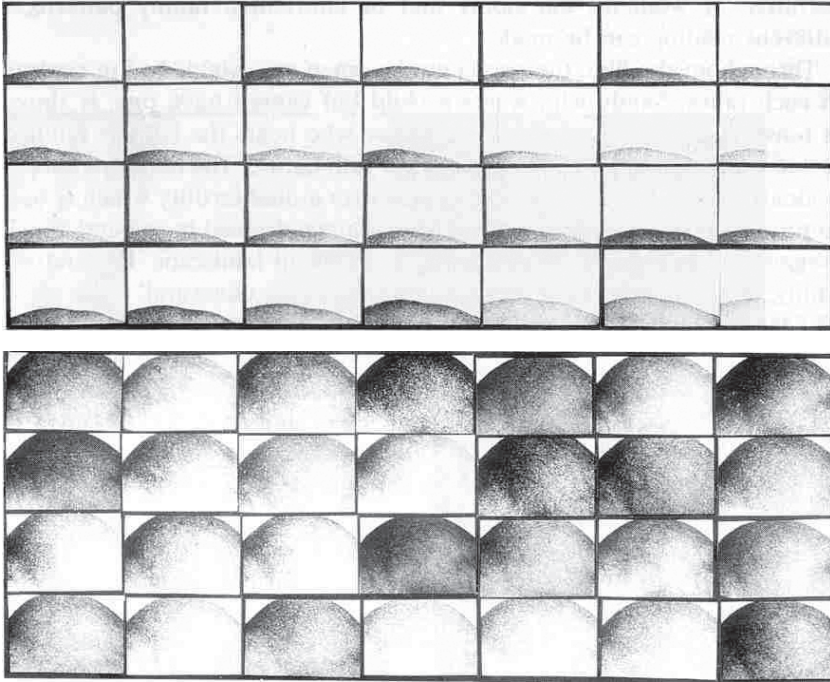


Figure 1. Susan Hiller, *Ten Months* (1977–79) 10 photographs and texts (detail).

abstract minimalist sequence and its complexity only emerges in conjunction with the written texts that accompany it. Visually, the repeated swelling curves resemble lunar landscapes that refer indexically to the body’s changing shape and ontologically to the pregnant artist as subject. The problematic that the work addresses is the dichotomy between the pregnant embodied subject and the artist as creative subject, as the accompanying text makes clear:

TWO/ She must have wanted this, this predicament, these contradictions. She believes physical conception must be ‘enabled’ by will or desire, like any other creative process. (Pregnant with thought. Brainchild. Giving birth to an idea.)

Hiller plays on the traditional metaphor of creativity in which the (male) artist claims to conceive and give birth to imaginative ideas, but as a woman artist this metaphor has become literally embodied as a paradox. What is the relation between the artistic subject—the “she” who must have wanted this, who wills and desires—and “the irrational non-object” of pregnancy that circulates through the images? Hiller exposes the contradiction that the metaphor of male

creativity conceals, that actual conception and pregnancy are bodily conditions that cannot be “enabled” by will or desire and, in this sense, are quite unlike the practices involved in making art. Her struggle to resolve this contradiction finally produces a splitting in the subject:

TEN/Ten Months

“seeing” (& depicting) . . . natural ‘fact’ (photos)

“feeling” (& describing) . . . cultural artifact (texts)

Split between “seeing” and “feeling,” “fact” and “artifact,” the artist as maker of the photos and writer of the texts reproduces the doubling of the pregnant subject and her ontological uncertainty in a way that mirrors Kristeva’s description of the maternal body as “motherhood’s impossible syllogism.” But Hiller also articulates this division in the way that the first-person speech of the creative subject is enacted in the *written* text (description) against the belly fragments as objects of *visual* representation (depiction). In giving voice as the pregnant subject, she separates her “self” in the text from “the section of the body you couldn’t talk about,” which is located in the objective visible realm. The “pregnant part” is further confined within a minimalist grid, which imposes order through formal sequence and repetition. But, as the panels progress through the ten months, the curve of the belly swells until it presses against the edge of the photographs. Its distended volume suggests an autonomous growth that can be barely contained within the rectangular frames, like monstrous swellings or cells multiplying, as indeed they are during pregnancy.⁷ The embodied pregnant woman, like the monster, thus destabilizes the concept of the singular self, threatening to spill over the boundaries of the unified subject. What emerges in *Ten Months* is the complex figuration of relations between the artist as creative self and embodied other, which is played out in an aesthetic of embodied *becoming* rather than familiar closure in birth. Here, the pregnant belly threatens to exceed the rational framework of the work, disrupting the binary categories through which the “clean and proper” self is held apart from abjection (Kristeva 1982, 8).

Braidotti’s “materialist theory of becoming” opens up a way of thinking through the complexity of the embodied pregnant subject as process. Hiller’s *Ten Months* explores the specific spatiality and temporality of pregnancy from the perspective of the embodied productive subject. Both theory and practice pose questions about the contested relationship between the discursive construction of the maternal body within cultural and historical contexts and the particularity of individual embodied experience. In the next section, I extend these questions further by exploring the representation and self-representation of a disabled maternal subject, artist Alison Lapper.⁸ Can representations of the disabled pregnant body destabilize conventional aesthetic ideals, on the one hand, and expectations of the maternal body, on the other?

THE DISABLED MATERNAL BODY

British artist Marc Quinn's portrait of *Alison Lapper (8 Months)* (2000), represents the artist in late pregnancy and naked (Figure 2). Sculpted in white crystalline marble, the statue draws on the ideal of physical beauty defined by classical Greek sculpture but, in choosing to represent a heavily pregnant woman with severe limb disabilities, Quinn challenges aesthetic preconceptions based on bodily integrity and physical perfection. He invites us to consider whether a bodily ideal that is readily accepted in the limbless and fragmented classical statues in the British Museum can be recognized in a "real life" figure, "using the weight of tradition to undermine itself" (Quinn quoted in Tate Liverpool 2002, unpaginated). This point was evidently lost on the *London Evening Standard* in its response to the news that the Lapper statue, to be enlarged to 4.7 meters high, has been chosen in competition to occupy the famous fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. The headline read: "So, Is This Really What We Want on Trafalgar Square's Empty Plinth?" (quoted in *The Independent*, 17 March 2004). In his choice of sitter and medium, Quinn refutes such questions and tries, in his words, to use "beauty to conquer prejudice" by drawing on classical sculptural traditions (Quinn quoted in Tate Liverpool 2002, unpaginated). The medium of white marble is associated with memorial art and thus to use it to represent a living disabled pregnant woman is already an act of aesthetic subversion. The exquisitely modeled face and body, the classical pose of the head and torso, and the elevated position of the figure on a plinth combine to challenge conventional understanding of disability. Lapper, who collaborated with Quinn as model, saw the sculpture as a significant statement on her behalf: "I regard it as a modern tribute to femininity, disability and motherhood. It is so rare to see disability in everyday life—let alone naked, pregnant and proud." (Lapper quoted in London).

Indeed, Quinn's work addresses significant questions about the nature of responses to the sight of pregnancy and disability and, implicitly, about the rights of women with disabilities to bear children. But, does this subversion of bodily norms free disabled women from a confining aesthetic? I offer a more ambivalent reading here.

Quinn celebrates Lapper's physical embodiment using the conventions of classical sculpture, but the medium of white marble with a translucent and reflective surface works simultaneously to fix *and* to dematerialize her identity as a pregnant subject. In their dialogue on the disabled body, Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick suggest that in order to guarantee the autonomy of the subject, "the body must appear *invulnerable, predictable and consistent* in form and function, above all free from the possibility of disruption" (1998, 232, emphasis added). The choice of marble has the effect of stabilizing the potentially disruptive figure of the disabled pregnant mother, whose embodiment is immobilized



Figure 2. Marc Quinn, *Alison Lapper (8 months)* (2000).

in memorial form. Rather than “becoming,” as in Hiller’s work, the temporality of pregnancy appears here suspended at a fixed moment in time. My reading is informed by viewing the sculpture in the empty “white cube” of the gallery in a solo exhibition of Quinn’s work in 2002, which in turn raises questions about the context for any reading of an artwork that are beyond the scope of this paper. The crowded urban setting of Trafalgar Square may more precisely invoke the vulnerability, unpredictability, and inconsistency of the figure as a

public monument.⁹ But this prompts a further question about Lapper's identity as a professional artist. In assuming the elevated status of monumental art does Lapper's position as a materially situated individual agent become obscured?

When Quinn's sculpture was first shown, Lapper's self-identity as a practicing artist was not widely known. In a conversation recorded in the Tate Liverpool exhibition catalogue, Quinn accepted an analogy "between the hidden process going on in the artist's mind and the hidden process going on inside the mother's womb" (Tate Liverpool 2002, unpaginated). In a double move, his assumed correspondence between the conscious creative process of the artist and the unconscious process in the maternal womb effaces Lapper's artistic autonomy and denies her agency as a maternal subject. This effacement of the female artist as creative *and* maternal subject is a common trope in traditional art criticism, but it is one also reinscribed in Julia Kristeva's essay on avant-garde aesthetics, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini" (1980). While for Kristeva the maternal is a privileged realm, it remains split between the semiotic and the symbolic and the agency of the mother is erased: "It happens but I'm not there," "I cannot realise it, but it goes on" (Kristeva 1980, 237). As Michelle Boulos Walker comments in her discussion of Kristeva's writing, "The maternal is a metaphorical site that precludes reference to women" (Boulos Walker 1998, 3). In place of the mother, "the artist speaks from a place where she is not, where she knows not" (Kristeva 1980, 242), and, in this move, "the productive subject silences woman's (maternal) body by setting itself in her place" (Boulos Walker 1998, 116).¹⁰ But Lapper resists her silencing as an artist and, indeed, uses her visibility in Quinn's sculpture to launch her own work. "The sculpture provided a platform for my work. But hopefully it is being exhibited on its own merits because it has taken a long time to achieve some acceptance that images of a naked disabled woman can be considered as art" (quoted in *The Independent*, 14 May 2004).

Lapper's photographs, including a series of thirteen self-portraits that took their inspiration from the Venus de Milo, have been shown in a number of venues in the United Kingdom. In an exhibition of her work entitled *Vital* at Nottingham Castle Museum and Art Gallery, she showed a series of images based on herself and her infant son, Parys, that adopt imaginary and fantastic scenarios described thus: "Shimmering through water you may see images of flying, floating figures, perhaps a winged Venus, or the mermaid and her child." Lapper makes images that question perceived ideas of disability and, by drawing on myth and fairy tale, creates alternative visions of herself and Parys as marvels and monsters. In contrast to the stasis and monumentality of Quinn's sculptural portrait, her body floats and spins through the air as though it were released from gravity. In *Angel*, Lapper's naked torso, a single wing replacing her absent arms, projects forcefully into a dark void edged with pink and red flower shapes (Figure 3). Here, the maternal imagination has powers to summon up fantasies



Figure 3. Alison Lapper, *Angel* (1999).

of flight that both acknowledge and transcend an insistently embodied reality. In a video transcript, she says:

Why do I use myself? That's a good point. My body isn't this ugly that I had always assumed it was because I'd been told it was.

Even in society today you still do it. You are disabled so therefore you are ugly. So now, I think, I almost throw myself at the public, . . . then say, well actually, look again. . . . I don't feel ugly and I forget that people get quite shocked by my nudity and by what I'm doing, but then great . . . if that's had an impact . . . good. (Intermedia)

Through her work, Lapper insists on her own material reality in order to challenge aesthetic perceptions of what is deemed beautiful and ugly in the human body. She rejects the label 'disabled mother' and, in a demonstration of the power of maternal imagination to create monsters, she gives birth to images of herself and her child in an imaginative process of transformation. In *Angel*, the figure of the alien is a means through which to imagine maternal bodies in ways that open up morphologies of embodiment to "mutations, changes and transformations" (Braidotti 2002, 2). And, by asserting her presence as both a

mother and an artist who has a physical disability, Lapper disrupts the boundaries that confine disabled and maternal bodies to the nonproductive sphere. In so doing, I argue, she destabilizes aesthetic ideals of the maternal body and interrogates social norms of motherhood. In the next section, I pursue these ideas further in a consideration of the British artist Tracey Emin and her work on the maternal body in relation to termination and loss.

Tracey Emin makes multiple references to her own pregnancies and terminations in her work. She frequently uses images, objects, and materials from her life to address such dangerous subjects for women as female desire, sexual acts, and abortion, consciously mobilizing her life story as a set of narratives and performances. She produces her own life as a series of texts in deliberately unrefined autobiographical form that has the effect of an unmediated intimacy in relation to herself and her sexual experiences. The artfulness of Emin's work is in the way she reworks and represents these experiences through a range of different aesthetic strategies that assert her agency as an artist. As Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend suggest (2002, 7), this is done through "a recurrent strategy of repetition and difference, that informs self-representation." In this sense, Emin's work is the purposeful reconstruction of the past as a set of stories and images, rather than the truth of a life. Repeatedly through her artwork and performances, she brings "Tracey Emin" into being as an artistic identity whose self-exposure is her trademark. One of the strongest aspects of Emin's work is the way in which it speaks with eloquence of the place where she was materially situated as a young woman, literally in the southern English seaside town of Margate, but also, by extension, in a particular pathologized representation of working-class femininity and sexuality, the figure of the "slag." Rather than attempting to distance herself from this identity, Emin defiantly embraces it. Through her work, she territorializes her own body as the signifier of "Mad Tracey from Margate," who operates as a permitted transgressive figure within the conventions of the art world. Emin's insistent registration of herself as the text of her work is often misread as a direct expression of identity, but the complex and often indirect ways in which she represents her experiences imply a more complex set of mediations between her life and her art.¹¹

Like Lapper, Emin's deployment of her own body is strategic and she too works with the difference and connection between the ideal and the real, the beautiful and the ugly. As Jennifer Doyle (2002, 102) suggests, this is particularly the case where she employs a "bad-sex aesthetic" to explore experiences that can be exhilarating, pleasurable, or abject. For example, the monoprint *Terribly Wrong* (1999), shows the artist's naked body arched back with legs apart, expelling "an abortive squiggly pile of blood, shit or semen" (Doyle 2002, 114) (Figure 4). The female body is rendered with crude forceful strokes and seen from a foreshortened frontal view that emphasizes its vulnerability. Its isolated placing on the blank page below the wobbly uncertain script, "Terribly Wrong"

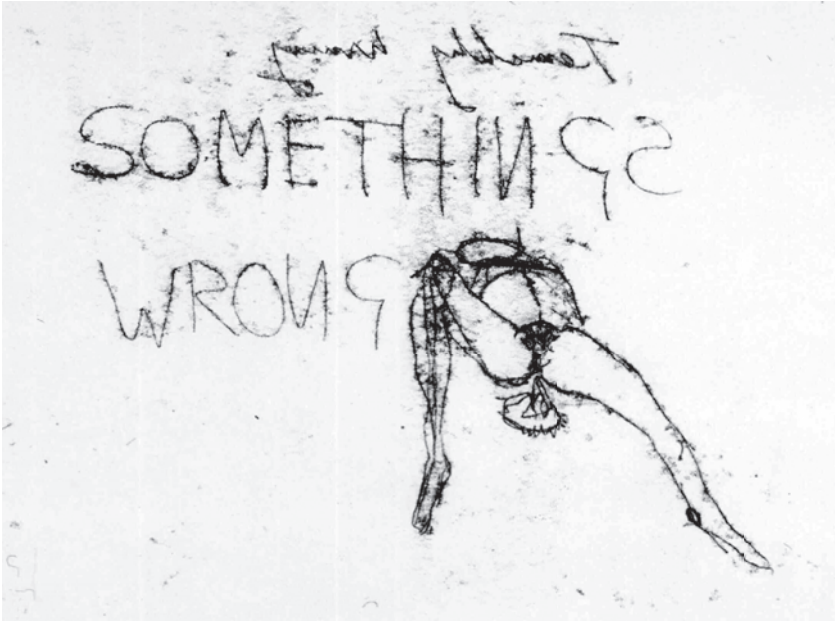


Figure 4. Tracey Emin, *Terribly wrong* (1997).

(in reverse) and “SOMETHING’S WRONG,” has an effect that both touches and distances. The technique of monoprint—drawing an image directly onto the plate, which is then reversed in the printing process—conveys both the immediacy of the direct trace of Emin’s hand and articulates a sense of otherness, of that which is familiar having become strange. The intimacy and distance effected by the technical process mirrors the immediacy and time lag involved in its production. It is, as Doyle suggests, both “a story that is completely scripted and absolutely personal” (2002, 109).

Whether or not this is a literal representation of a termination, it returns us to Braidotti’s figuration of the monstrous, in which “sexual excess, especially in the woman, is always a factor” (1996, 140). Emin’s sexual excess is figured here and elsewhere in her work, for example, in her installation *My Bed* (1998), which recreates the littered detritus of a night’s drinking and sexual encounter as a site of abjection. While the critical reception of her work usually focuses on the artist’s sexuality, I suggest that abjection can be more specifically situated in the loss that it repeatedly reenacts. Both of these works point to Emin’s experiences of termination and her mourning for her “dead children” in a series of repetitions.¹² The gendered trauma of termination “leaves the subject *with nothing to show for it*,” and this sense of a missing presence is insistently registered from the

viewpoint of a failed maternal subject (Corby 2004, unpaginated). Emin gives to her mourning self the opportunity to speak back through her art, a means of resistance against silencing and thus a voice in relation to an experience that was literally unspeakable. And, while this representation of her experience gives Emin agency, it does not imply an unmediated outpouring of the truth. As Annette Kuhn (1995, 103) comments of her own working-class girlhood: "Though perhaps for those of us who have learnt silence through shame, the hardest thing of all is to find a voice: not the voice of the monstrous singular ego but one that, summoning the resources of the place we come from, can speak with eloquence of, and for, that place." Emin's enactment of shame and mourning through her artwork resonates with contemporary debates about abortion. For feminists, visual images of conception and pregnancy have become a crucial site of struggle in abortion politics. The category of fetal personhood that emerged with fetal imaging has been contested widely by feminist critics, who have argued that the woman as maternal subject is always erased from such representations.¹³ Peggy Phelan's analysis of the visibility of the fetus within New Right antiabortion campaigns focuses on the psychic dimensions of the debate. She notes the central failure of such discursive representations to represent the life and experiences of pregnant women, thus stressing, "the illegibility of the materiality of a pregnant body within a visual economy that everywhere marks the boundary between self and other. Embodied in and by what is and is not one body, the visibly pregnant woman makes the possibility of a continuous subject/ivity real" (1993, 171). As Phelan suggests, there is a fundamental contradiction in the representation of the maternal subject as both the embodiment of lawful desire for reproduction within a patriarchal economy and as "the spectre of the monstrous, forever murdering/castrating, mother" (1993, 135). In *Terribly Wrong*, Emin presents the monstrous spectacle of an abject maternal body, but in a way that insists we recognize the embodied pain of a maternal subject who has suffered loss through termination. She refuses to accept the invisibility assigned to abortion or the boundary between self and other that it constitutes. Emin's repeated representations of the sight/site of loss emphasize both its psychic and embodied continuity, and the continuity of a relationship with those for whom she mourns. The sexual politics of her work involve a perpetual ambivalence between excess and absence in the over-presence of the artist in the work and in her refusal to leave the scene. Her work does not offer consolation or reparation for loss, but insists on its material presence traced through images and mementoes of her (un)maternal body.

MONSTROUS PREGNANCIES

In the final part of this essay, I offer a reading of monstrous pregnancy in the work of American artist Cindy Sherman and consider how she uses the grotesque and comedic potential of horror to interrogate what it means to be—or what is meant to be—maternal. I focus on two of Sherman's representations of pregnant embodiment from the series *History Portraits* (1988–90), and *Sex Pictures* (1992), to suggest that she opens up a space for a different configuration of the monstrous maternal. What might be seen as monstrous in her performance of the maternal is the way in which she reworks, deforms, and conflates signifiers of sexual identity. In these photographs, the pregnant body is figured as both sexual and monstrous through prosthetic devices. Sherman's use of phantom or "fake" pregnancies are one means of denaturalizing the maternal body, or as Donna Haraway puts it (1992, 300), "queering what counts as nature." So, what kinds of "queering" do such perverse representations of the pregnant body enact, and are these productive for rethinking the representation of maternal body?

Whereas Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* of the 1970s have been described as a "play of simulacrum" (Bronfen 1998, 423), a significant difference in her more recent photographs is the very obviousness of the masquerade. In *Untitled #205* (1989), from the *History Portraits* series, the old master nude is visibly faked: the face is a cosmetic mask; the prosthetic pregnant torso is hooked over her shoulders; and the open-weave, textured material of her drapery and the knotted headdress make no attempt to simulate the lustrous silks and satins of its Renaissance prototype (Figure 5).¹⁴ Her slightly pursed lips and wide eyes suggest both innocence and complicity with the viewer as the figure looks back at us looking at her: this is a staged encounter in which we know, as she knows, that we are being had. This marks a shift from the earlier "innocence" of her feminine figures subjected to the absent spectator's gaze and forms a link with her later series *Sex Pictures*, where the viewer is caught, uncomfortably, looking. This exchange of looks further alerts us to the representation of the figure's sexuality. Her hands hold up the revealing material that both conceals and exposes her belly and gesture to the sexual zones of the body, the exaggerated erect red nipples and parted thighs. The purple garter worn on her upper arm is a fetish object, both a metonymic and a metaphoric displacement upward from her genitals. Sherman thus makes explicit what is implicit in her High Renaissance prototype, that within a masculine visual economy, female sexuality is displaced onto fetishized objects, often in the form of jewels or satins. Sherman's figure discloses in the ambiguity and duplicity of its maternal and sexual identity the repressed understanding that the asexual maternal is always also the sexual feminine.



Figure 5. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #205, History Portraits* (1989).



Figure 6. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #250, Sex Pictures* (1992).

Norman Bryson comments in relation to the *History Portraits* series that “each step in the direction of enhancing, ennobling, aestheticizing the body is matched somewhere else by a step toward the grotesque” (Bryson 1991, 92). Elisabeth Bronfen also stresses Sherman’s oscillation between what she sees as the two fixed modalities of feminine self-representation within Western discourse: woman as fetish or simulacrum and the feminine as mutable, castrated, monstrous (Bronfen 1996, 1998).¹⁵ *Untitled #205, History Portraits* holds an uneasy tension between the fetishized simulacrum of a sexual feminine body and its threatening collapse into monstrous and castrated maternity.

In *Untitled #250, Sex Pictures*, this interplay of seduction and repulsion is intensified. Sherman’s image of a pregnant and birthing body is both monstrously sexual and aging (Figure 6). Sherman seems closer here to Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of “pregnant senile hags” in *Rabelais and His World* (1968). Bakhtin argued that the material body is considered grotesque because, unlike the ideal body, it does not correspond to “the aesthetics of the readymade and completed.” On the contrary, its traditional components are “copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration and dismemberment . . . contrary to the classic image of the finished, completed man, cleansed . . . of all the scoriae of birth and development” (25). He cited as examples of “grotesque realism” certain terracotta figurines of “pregnant senile hags”: “There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body. . . . Moreover, these old hags are laughing” (25–26). While potentially misogynistic, the figurines for Bakhtin do not evoke horror but represent a “principle of growth” (26). As in Braidotti’s argument, they materialize “becoming,” a reiteration of life rather than decay (2002, 2). These aged pregnant bodies represent the carnivalesque “woman on top” turned critically in the form of laughter against official culture. The laughter of Bakhtin’s hags is subversive but, as Mary Russo has shown (1986, 216), such figures are also deeply ambivalent for, as she wrote, “women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive—dangerous and in danger.” And, while Russo suggested that the grotesque “might be used affirmatively to destabilise the idealisations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire” (1986, 221), this is necessarily a tricky enterprise. What then is the effect of Sherman’s use of grotesque realism in *Untitled #250*? Does it risk reinforcing what Russo called the “connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of aging” (1986, 63)? Or does it expose a problematic representation from which women are unable to escape?

The figure of the “hag” is both pregnant and “senile” with a withered mask, thin grey hair, and prosthetic body parts. Her erect nipples are a vibrant red, as

is her vagina, surrounded by a mass of dark pubic hair, and she “births” a string of grotesque sausages between her amputated thighs.¹⁶ Unlike Bakhtin’s figurines, Sherman’s figure is not laughing, but she is degraded in a very Bakhtinian sense: “To degrade means also to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs: it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth” (1968, 24). The figure is disturbing in its combination of sexuality, monstrous birth, and mortality, and for the way in which its aggressive stare and the phallic sausages are at odds with the seductive pose and truncated legs. It appears to be aggressive *and* violated, phallic *and* castrated in a way that simultaneously repulses and invites the look of the viewer. If Sherman’s earlier work invited a projective voyeurism or a narcissistic identification on the part of the gendered viewer, this photograph offers a more complex version of embodiment.¹⁷

One difficulty of encountering Sherman’s images is that of thinking what category of embodied experience they belong to—just what kind of body do they evoke? On the one hand, the figures are literally “made up,” their assemblages of fake body parts show that there is no prediscursive body, but only an unstable locus of contested meaning. At the same time, she deliberately engages with the material specificities of bodies that are aging and sexually abject. What queers nature in Sherman’s work, I suggest, is that she pushes at this gap between performance and material embodiment in a way that is uncomfortable for the viewer to encounter. The seduction and repulsion of the “pregnant senile hag” not only disturbs categories of sexual and maternal identity, but Sherman’s configuration of the body itself also troubles our very understanding of what bodies can be.¹⁸

PROMISING MONSTERS?

In this essay, I have argued that the works cited by Susan Hiller, Marc Quinn, Alison Lapper, Tracey Emin, and Cindy Sherman articulate bodily schema in ways that enable us to imagine different kinds of practices and values through which to figure maternal bodies. Susan Hiller articulates the spatiality and temporality of her “becoming” body as well as the split in her own subjectivity during pregnancy. Marc Quinn’s sculpture of Alison Lapper in late pregnancy and her own self-portraits invite our consideration of cultural investments in ideals of physical beauty and perfection, while Lapper’s photomontages imaginatively reconfigure the disabled mother as “other.” Tracey Emin’s artworks record her experiences of unwanted pregnancy and termination through an aesthetic of abjection that rejects a libidinal economy. In her *Sex Pictures*, Cindy Sherman depicts the maternal body as both sexual and grotesque, deforming and reworking signifiers of pregnancy and sexuality. Each artist engages with

bodies that are not deemed beautiful—indeed, they may be disabled, sexually abject, or embodied in disturbing ways. Such bodies, I suggest are “promising monsters,” not because they offer better aesthetic models for the maternal embodiment—that is not art’s function—but for the ways in which they explore relations between culturally constructed maternal bodies and embodied and imagined differences. As Rosi Braidotti argues (2002, 213), “The challenge that the hybrid, the anomalous, the monstrous others throw in our direction is a disassociation from the sensibility that we inherited from the nineteenth century, one which pathologized and criminalized difference.” To engage with the anomalous and monstrously different may promise different kinds of figurations of maternal subjects and their ways of being in the world. These do not offer blueprints or solutions, but they may help us understand cultural anxieties that surround the maternal body and offer different kinds of figurations that acknowledge the agency and potential power of the pregnant subject.

NOTES

This essay is part of a chapter of my forthcoming book *Maternal Embodiment in Visual Culture*, I. B. Tauris Ltd., 2007. The title is taken from Donna Haraway’s 1992 essay “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for In/Appropriated Others,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Larry Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Amy Treichler (New York: Routledge). I should like to thank the two anonymous readers as well as my colleague Jackie Stacey for their helpful comments on the final draft.

1. Young has also described pregnancy as a “paradigm of bodily experience in which the transparent unity of self dissolves and the body attends positively to itself at the same time as it enacts its projects” (1998, 274).

2. A critique of the rational and disembodied masculine subject has been central to feminist “body theory.” See Bordo 1993, Butler 1993, Grosz 1994, Gatens 1996, Davis 1997, and Shildrick and Price 1998.

3. In this argument, the maternal body represents the abjected “other,” which it is necessary to destroy in order to restore the “clean and proper” self (Kristeva 1982, 8). Constable 1999 and Stacey 1993 offer different readings of the monstrous maternal in the final film of the series, *Alien Resurrection* (1997).

4. As Davis comments (1997, 15), “recent feminist theory has displayed a marked ambivalence towards the material body and a tendency to privilege the body as metaphor.” I discuss the problematic of the maternal body as both a discursive category in language and representation and material site of somatic and psychic attachment in my forthcoming book.

5. For a critique of the individuated subject in connection to pregnancy and birth, see Battersby 1998, Boulous Walker 1998, Young 1998, Tyler 2000, and Shildrick 2002.

6. Schrader in Marland 1987, 47. For an historical analysis of maternal imagination, see Huet 1991 and Epstein 1995.

7. Stacey explores the science of monsters in her book *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer* (1997), in relation both to the monstrous maternal and to tumorous cells.

8. Lapper is an artist whose work “questions notions of physical normality and beauty in a society that considers her deformed because she was born without arms” (BritArt).

9. At the time of this writing, the statue has not been erected. It is due in May 2005 as part of the pedestrianization and remodeling of Trafalgar Square.

10. See Kristeva’s writing on her own maternal experience in her essay “*Stabat Mater*” (1977/1986) and Betterton (1996) for a discussion of Kristeva and maternal creativity in relation to modernist artists Kathe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker.

11. For a discussion of the critical reception of Emin’s work, see Betterton and other essays in Merck and Townsend 2002.

12. Aspects of her experience of pregnancy and abortion feature repeatedly in Emin’s work to date, for example, the sculptural and video installations *The first time I was pregnant I started to crochet the baby a shawl* (1990–2000) and *Homage to Edvard Munch and all my Dead Children* (1998), and two films, *How It Feels* (1996) and *I Don’t Think So* (2000).

13. On the status of fetal personhood, see Petchesky 1987, Franklin 1991, Hartouni, 1992, Stabile 1992, Duden 1993, and Phelan 1993.

14. Sherman’s photograph is based on Raphael’s portrait of his mistress, La Fornarina, who is shown naked in a similar pose with her hands covering her breasts and sex. This is one of a series of pastiches of historical paintings that Sherman had studied at college.

15. Sherman’s work is almost always constituted in two stages associated with the shift in her work from pastiche to abjection. Notable critical readings of her work are those by Krauss 1993, Phelan 1993, Mulvey 1996, and Bronfen 1996; 1998.

16. The string of sausages recalls the carnivalesque and phallic figure of Punch, whose humor is also grotesque and sexually aggressive.

17. Despite the claims and counterclaims for reading Sherman’s work within a feminist politics of the body by Mulvey 1991, Krauss 1993, and Jones 1997, this framework seems to be inadequate to address the specific transgressions of her later work.

18. My thanks to one of the readers of the final draft for making this valuable point although there is not scope to develop it within this paper.

REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1968. *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Battersby, Christine. 1998. *The phenomenal woman: Feminist metaphysics and the patterns of identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Betterton, Rosemary. 1996. *An intimate distance: Women, artists, and the body*. London: Routledge.
- . 2002. Why is my art not as good as me? Feminism, femininity and “life drawing” in Tracey Emin’s art. In *The art of Tracey Emin*. Ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend. London: Thames & Hudson.

- Bordo, Susan. 1993. *Unbearable weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Boulous Walker, Michelle. *Philosophy and the maternal body: Thinking through silence*. New York: Routledge.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 1996. Signs of wonder and traces of doubt: On teratology and embodied difference. In *Between monsters, goddesses, and cyborgs: Feminist confrontations with science, medicine, and cyberspace*. Ed. Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti. London: Zed Books.
- . 2002. *Metamorphoses: Towards a materialist theory of belonging*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Britart. http://www.britart.com/artists/artist1071_all.aspx.
- Bronfen, Elizabeth. 1996. The knotted subject: Hysteria, Irma, and Cindy Sherman. In *Generations and geographies in the visual arts: Feminist readings*. Ed. Griselda Pollock. New York: Routledge.
- . 1998. *The knotted subject: Hysteria and its discontents*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Bryson, Norman. 1991. The ideal and the object: Cindy Sherman's historical portraits. *Parkett* 29: 91.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* New York: Routledge.
- Constable, Catherine. 1999. Becoming the monster's mother: Morphologies of identity in the *Alien* series. In *Alien zone II*. Ed. Annette Kuhn. London: Verso.
- Corby, Vanessa. 2004. Something to show for it? Makers and making between trauma and cultural memory. Unpublished.
- Creed, Barbara. 1993. *The monstrous feminine: Film, feminism, and psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Davis, Kathy. 1997. *Embodied practices: Feminist perspectives on the body*. London: Sage Publications.
- Doyle, Jennifer. 2002. The effect of intimacy: Tracey Emin's bad-sex aesthetic. In *The art of Tracey Emin*. Ed. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Duden, Barbara. 1993. *Disembodying women perspectives on pregnancy and the unborn*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Epstein, Julia. 1999. The pregnant imagination, women's bodies and fetal rights. In *Inventing maternity, politics, science, and literature, 1650–1865*. Ed. Carol Barash and Susan E. Greenfield. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Franklin, Sarah. 1991. Fetal fascinations: New dimensions to the medical-scientific construction of fetal personhood. In *Off centre: Feminism and cultural studies*. Ed. Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey. London: Harper Collins.
- Gatens, Moira. 1996. *Imaginary bodies: Essays on corporeality, power, and ethics*. London: Routledge.
- Grosz, Elisabeth. 1994. *Volatile bodies: Towards a corporeal feminism*. New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna. 1992. The promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for in/appropriated others. In *Cultural studies*. Ed. Larry Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Amy Treichler. New York: Routledge.
- Hartouni, Valerie. 1992. Fetal exposures: Abortion politics and the optics of allusion. *Camera Obscura* 29: 131–51.

- Hiller, Susan. 1991. *The myth of primitivism*. New York: Routledge.
- Huet, Marie-Helene. 1991. Monstrous imagination: Progeny as art in French classicism. *Critical Enquiry* 17: 718–37.
- Krauss, Rosalind. 1993. *Cindy Sherman 1975–1993*. New York: Rizzoli.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1980a. Stabat mater. In *The Kristeva reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1980b. Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini. In *Desire in language: A semiotic approach to literature and art*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1982. *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kuhn, Annette. 1995. *Family secrets: Acts of memory and imagination*. London: Verso.
- London. 2005. http://www.london.gov.uk/view_press_release.jsp?releaseid=2782.
- Marland, Hilary, trans. and ed. 1987. “Mother and child were saved”: *The memoirs (1693–1740) of the Friesian midwife Catherina Schrader*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Merck, Mandy, and Chris Townsend, eds. 2002. *The art of Tracey Emin*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1996. Cosmetics and abjection: Cindy Sherman 1977–1987. In *Fetishism and curiosity*. London: British Film Institute.
- Petchesky, Rosalind. 1987. Fetal images: The power of visual culture in the politics of reproduction. In *Reproductive technologies: Gender, motherhood and medicine*. Ed. Michelle Stanworth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. New York: Routledge.
- Russo, Mary. *The female grotesque: Risk, excess, and modernity*. New York: Routledge.
- Shildrick, Margrit. 2002. *Embodying the monster: Encounters with the vulnerable self*. London: Sage Publications.
- , and Janet Price. 1998. *Vital signs: Feminist reconfigurations of the bio/logical body*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Stabile, Carole. 1992. Shooting the mother: Fetal photography and the politics of disappearance. *Camera Obscura* 28: 179–206.
- Stacey, Jackie. 1997. *Teratologies: A cultural study of cancer*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2003. She is not herself: The deviant relations of *Alien Resurrection*. *Screen* 44, no. 3 (Autumn): 251–76.
- Tate Gallery. 2002. *Marc Quinn*. Liverpool: Tate Gallery.
- Tyler, Imogen. 2000. Re-framing pregnant embodiment. In *Transformations: Thinking through feminism*. Ed. Sara Ahmed, Jane Kilby, Celia Lury, Maureen McNeil, and Beverly Skeggs. New York: Routledge.
- . 2001. Skin-tight: Celebrity, pregnancy and subjectivity. In *Thinking through the Skin*. Ed. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey. New York: Routledge.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1998. Pregnant embodiment: Subjectivity and alienation. In *Body and flesh: A philosophical reader*. Ed. Don Welton. Oxford: Blackwell.