



“Sending baby dust to you all...”

Sally Butcher, College of Art & Design, Birmingham City University with Centre of Reproduction Research, De Montfort University, UK, sally.butcher@mail.bcu.ac.uk

My ongoing interdisciplinary practice-based PhD considers ways in which understandings of (In)fertility are manifested within the texts of women in personally led online fertility forum spaces and the bigger hidden narratives around these fragments. Building on a historical feminist focus on lived experience, my interest is in archive, narrative, meaning in language and bodily “data” through a conceptual artistic practice. This research considers alternative linguistic interpretations of the disease of infertility, within and against authoritative medicalised rhetoric and asks what other semantics can emerge in dialogue between women. It seeks to reimagine (In)fertile Embodiment through creative feminist praxis, within non-normative “sub-maternal” subjectivities and temporalities, traversing infertility’s intersections of invisibility and silence through formulations of absence and its (im)material presence. Experimentation embraces an embodied methodology of hope and failure, interspersing words and images, text and matter, through durational practices using textual metaphor and data visualisation techniques. The research seeks to engage audiences around this stigmatised reproductive discourse and assert its re-presentation within a new “maternal spectrum”, expanding the parameters of maternal art and beyond.



Leafing through pages of a fertility forum, I unearth an extensive archive of women's words. Years of fragmented personal narratives on living through infertility; electronic messages sent, posted, and received in a metaphorical exchange between an offline individual body and the online collective body.

But like many archives, this one gathers its dust; a substance conventionally associated with dirt that we often try to ignore or remove. From fine elements frequently transferring from the body's surface mixing with everyday household particles, that pose real risks for the longevity of historical materials, through to industrial airborne byproducts from which our bodily exposure must be protected to avert the effects of its own lasting physical damage, caused by potential disease.

Infertility is officially defined as a disease,¹ an identity Sandelowski and de Lacey claim has been perpetuated by the advent of IVF in 1978, posing this treatment as its *cure*.² In this sterile medical arena any excess dust must also be eradicated. But in this vast virtual archive, away from the clinical site of infertility, there is a special type of 'baby dust' that has been permitted to settle; a "harmless" constituent, mere representations of good luck frequently endowed upon, or requested from, others enveloped in this circuitous pursuit of conception. Scattered through the pages of correspondence, it is often written into an opening plea or a simple signing off, to be read by an unknown recipient encouraged to respond. Should we also just brush off this mystical metaphor, swiftly discarding its light whimsical way of describing such a weighted process? *These* dust particles are not just small, rather completely invisible, undoubtedly more easily overlooked but far from meaningless. Indeed, this magical powder can be said to hold wish granting power when bestowed upon others, delivering significant beliefs in good fortune.

But this brings its own dangers; contributing to a harmful culture that many women experiencing infertility can find themselves swept up in, where they are led to believe that if they just wish hard enough (perhaps if they really want it enough?!), then it will happen. Language here is important, and these viewpoints need to be observed closely. I would like to speculate, however, that if we dust carefully, we may find lost information within these throwaway lines that warrants deeper examination.

¹ 'Infertility', World Health Organisation, <<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infertility>> [accessed 20 May 2024].

² Margarete Sandelowski, & Sheryl de Lacey, 'The Uses of a "Disease": Infertility as Rhetorical Vehicle'. *Infertility Around the Globe. New Thinking on Childlessness, Gender and Reproductive Technology*, ed. by Marcia C. Inhorn & Frank Van Balen (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), pp. 33–51.

I want to investigate whether this imaginary substance also comes heavy with hope, a *real* symbol of these women's reproductive desires for the presence of (an)other, that resides beneath the maternal wish accruing on the surface. I want to explore gaps in meaning that open up through this figurative language; what important embodied knowledges are revealed within this seemingly insignificant metaphor that may provide distance from an (unspeakable) truth – of real hope; of the loss of hope; of the loss of something that never was and that may never be. I am not speaking here of literal loss, shrouded in grief and earthly ashes – dust to dust – but one which may have no representation. I am intrigued by the reality of embodying such rhetorical constructions in the development of new (in)fertile narratives that complexify a binary between a normal and an abnormal body in pursuit of the maternal. My practice-led research builds knowledge making through meaningful modes of inquiry between text and matter within creative practice,³ exploring tensions of representation within infertility – a condition that is, itself, inherently invisible.

My study is driven by recognition that dominant narratives within these sociological areas of scholarship often implicitly conflate infertility with its purported biomedical *treatment*.⁴ Likewise, many depictions of infertility in art are often about ART (Assisted Reproductive Technologies), when there is much more we need to see. My work seeks to challenge the ingrained medicalisation of cultural discourses of infertility that can distance us from the maternal connection with which it is so tightly bound and can focus our vision solely through medical lenses. My curiosity in low cultural spaces led toward fertility forums, in a developing activist project that asked what is worthy of our attention. This spotlight on a growing arena led by women themselves, sees them speaking not to, but *through*, infertility. As women connect in extensive online networks, these spaces can serve as communities of care in uncertain moments, providing encouraging exchange between voices searching for further communication around their reproductive experiences. Conversations, conventionally lost, become indelibly written, recorded in this archived space for all to see.

³ For extensive analysis of practice research, see Lucy Cotter. *Reclaiming Artistic Research*. (Berlin, Hatje Cantz, 2024, 2nd Edition).

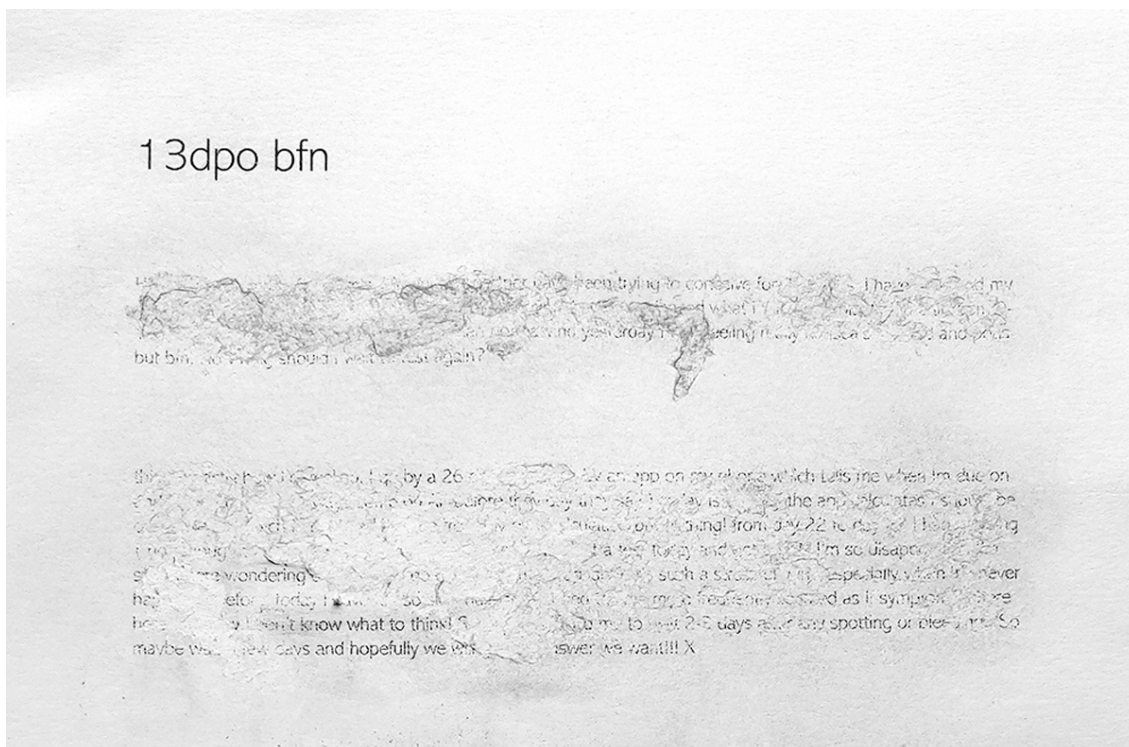
⁴ Gayle Davis & Tracey Loughran, (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Infertility in History: Approaches, Contexts and Perspectives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp 3–9. Margarete Sandelowski, & Sheryl de Lacey, 'The Uses of a "Disease": Infertility as Rhetorical Vehicle'. *Infertility Around the Globe. New Thinking on Childlessness, Gender and Reproductive Technology*, ed. by Marcia C. Inhorn & Frank Van Balen (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), pp. 33–51.

My broader PhD research investigates these informal texts in relation to authoritative medicalised discourse, observing language both referential and performative. It looks at moments of misconception within utterances from a supportive collective body that may not say what it really means to an invested audience holding out so much hope – speech acts to those trying to conceive that can in/accurately bring into being signs of gestation from shared scrutinised pregnancy tests. This appears against a backdrop of medical insight that can “officially” proclaim infertility to those on lengthier journeys, a definition that can, itself, be unstable.⁵

In this current piece, I want to give presence to this virtual dust to see how such non-indexical “data” becomes a proxy for bodies unbound from their solid storage, and what information it contains about infertile embodiment. I print out a section of the archive, the fresh paper forming a duplicate copy that offers reassuring distance but deserved weight(iness). I begin to sand gently at the surface in search of this elusive dust hidden in its layers. Ethically, I have a duty of care as a researcher here to remove *any* identifiable features from private moments that readily present themselves in these public dialogues. My methods are bound by an unobtrusive spectating, as conversing with these women or simply seeking consent is deemed more disruptive in its potential to disturb past moments that have settled, within this sensitive research. Carefully moving through the archive, I only “reproduce” (rather than extract) anonymised words or phrases that appear repeatedly, to reveal commonalities in this community. I acknowledge my positionality as an embodied researcher – an (in)fertile (m)other, who never entered this space as a subject during my own “journey”, because I could not share my private experience at the time. My care now to reveal these words to new public audiences, alongside expanded narratives from my dialogues with external consenting knowledgeable participants, and my own archive that is unexpectedly enfolding around these, comes from an empathetic position not to treat any of these women as objects of study.

My artistic process becomes another act of care here, in its attempt to fully erase those narrated performances of a medicalised infertility that have moved beyond the clinical encounter to pervade everyday life. I gaze across a culture of (self) control (or is it agency?) evident throughout these spaces, where women document their use of quasi-scientific methods to constantly measure and then report back on their own bodies.

⁵ See Ilaria Soave, Giuseppe Lo Monte, Roberto Marci, ‘Spontaneous Pregnancy and Unexplained Infertility: A Gift With Many Whys’, *North American journal of medical sciences*, 2021 Oct; 4(10) 512–513. doi: [10.4103/1947-2714.102010](https://doi.org/10.4103/1947-2714.102010).
C Gnorth et al, ‘Definition and prevalence of subfertility and infertility’, *Human Reproduction Journal*, 2005 Ma;20(5):1144–7 doi: [10.1093/humrep/deh870](https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/deh870).
Alison Taylor, ‘Extent of the problem’, *ABC of Subfertility*, *British Medical Journal*, 2003 Aug 23, 327(7412): 434–436.



Erasing.

In reframing this as artwork to be seen by another audience, it converses with past de-materialisation conceptual practice: aesthetic investigations (led by men) in the 1950s around the production of an artwork through the *play* of erasure, where an image is created through the removal, rather than addition, of marks.⁶ These early avantgarde manoeuvres, which privileged surface acts, can be seen in dialogue with Mary Kelly's later feminist picturing in her multi-layered 'scripto-visual' work, *Post-Partum-Document* (1976),⁷ which gave voice to the very *real* erasure of subjectivity within Conceptualism. Visualising utterances made by her child as he entered language, this processual piece became an early articulation of maternal subject formation, documenting the content of reproductive labour that left female artists less free to play, which demanded greater critical engagement from the viewer.

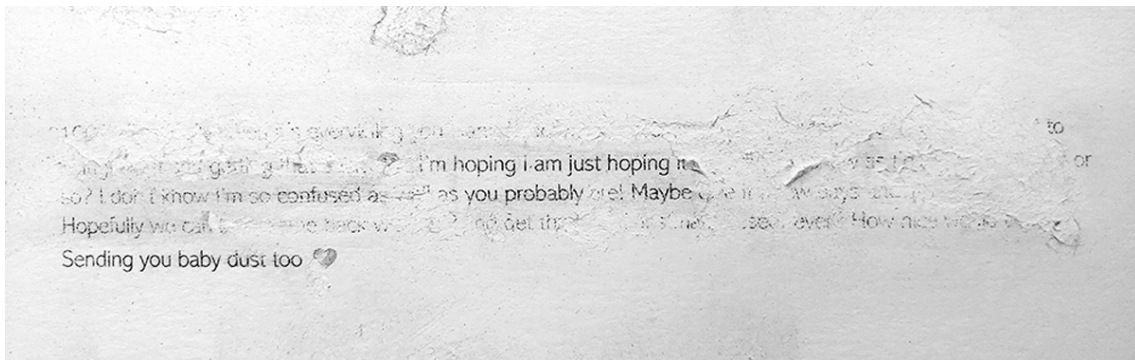
Developing this, I want to give value to erasure processes beyond play, to work with this literally and productively to creatively reveal its ethical inferences in relation to these women's hidden reproductive and maternal bodily experiences within the

⁶ Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953, traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame, 64.14 cm × 55.25 cm × 1.27 cm, Collection SFMOMA. <<https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.298/>> [accessed 20 May 2024].

⁷ Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*. Documentation I–VI, 1975, media vary, sizes vary. Collections across institutions. See also Mary Kelly, *Post-partum document* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1999).

realms of feminist production.⁸ Conceptual art's questioning of the visual's status becomes more valid here, in relation to a medical industry that similarly relies upon visualisation as an evidential tool, where seeing inside a woman's body confirms both her fertile and infertile status.⁹ But value *must* also be given to what is unseen (and unsaid). We need to seek more moments of autonomy for women in owning their bodily narratives, de-objectifying them through their telling of internal sensory experience and acknowledging affective states within the construction of bodily "reality", so frequently concealed beneath visible public maternal and bio-medical discourse (where so much, in this case, remains "unexplained").¹⁰

Sanding away well-rehearsed scripts by women who not only act out, but also direct, their own rituals, I try to leave those more muted words of hope and uncertainty that present themselves beneath perceptible knowledges of "success" and "failure" from medicalised reproductive practices which, by their nature, and culture, are devoid of chance (the space where hope resides).



Hoping.

⁸ See Pak-Keung Wan, *Adrift the Sea of Fertility*, 2017 <<https://www.pakkeungwan.co.uk/sea-of-fertility>> [accessed 15 September 2024], on (male) bodily states of wordlessness and being stuck, of infertility, which I discuss in my extended research.

⁹ This adds to a grander picture of systemic medical sexism, where women encounter a disproportionately greater amount of invasive internal investigation around infertility and carry the burden of its "treatment" through Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART), even if the diagnosis remains unexplained or male factor. Lack of research into male infertility develops from a historic gender bias, combined with a perception that ART has "solved" infertility. See Katerina A. Turner et al, 'Male Infertility is a Women's Health Issue – Research and Clinical Evaluation of Male Infertility is Needed', *Cells Journal*, 2020, Apr; 9(4):990. doi: [10.3390/cells9040990](https://doi.org/10.3390/cells9040990). See also Athur L. Griel, 'Infertile Bodies: Medicalisation, Metaphor and Agency', in Marcia C. Inhorn and Frank van Balen (eds), *Infertility Around the Globe: New Thinking on Childlessness, Gender and Reproductive Technologies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA and London, 2002), p 101.

¹⁰ In the UK, unexplained infertility accounts for around 1 in 4 cases of infertility, when no medical cause can be found in either partner. See also Elinor Cleghorn, *Unwell Women: A Journey Through Medicine and Myth in a Man-Made World* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2021) for bringing to attention the experiences and feelings of women, that medicine currently does not accommodate.

Erasure, by its essence, suggests something must be present before it is removed. Must (in)fertility itself always be seen in relation to a negation of the existence of fertility, as an *other* in the process of becoming? Or should it be permitted its own state of being, an observable liminal state of ‘unbecoming’¹¹ Quoting Jill Allison’s evocative phrase, is (in)fertility a ‘presence of absence’¹² or an absence of presence? Or perhaps, a deferral of presence, for (in)fertility may or may not be finite... so, how can this be presented?

I lose myself in semantic circles of dust that take us back to where we started; a word which at once infers two opposing meanings – to absent (to remove, often to cleanse) and to simultaneously present (as in sprinkle, to make dusty). Indeed, as I rub at the text, words smudge as though not fully fixed, whilst the dark sandpaper simultaneously seems to present its own dust on the pale paper, sitting atop the words like a layer of dirt I can’t remove.

Searching through these women’s infertile narratives, I become engaged in my own laborious cyclical process (physically and temporally) as I feel my body resist. As I continue, I encounter moments of doubt as it didn’t seem to be working. In repeating movements, I must pause and wait, watching for any sign of change. I start questioning how long it will take, what the outcome will be, and when to finally stop....

As larger sections of text eventually come away and greater amounts of dust appear, I wonder what it is all worth. In the past, dust held great value, traded with a language of its own. I sort through what I have collected, like generations of women ‘sifters’ before me. Nothing was wasted in this historically productive exchange where heavier powdered ‘soil’ was purchased by farmers to loosen and help fertilise dense marshy land, and lighter ‘breeze’ dust was sold to make industrial weighted bricks.¹³ Yet this market, built from modernity’s by-products, found itself at odds with capitalist ideas of progress, creating an undesirable underworld of the industrial poor beneath mainstream production, which began to represent a failure of bourgeois society that needed to be eradicated.¹⁴

Reading between the lines of this narrative of dust, emerges an inter-related tale of infertility’s discursive evolution, very telling in its own language of labour on the un(re)productive position of women. Seventeenth and eighteenth century women’s *barren* bodies were coupled with *soiled* metaphors of agricultural land, blown

¹¹ See Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp.11–14.

¹² Jill Allison, ‘Conceiving Silence: Infertility as discursive contradiction in Ireland’, *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 25(1), (2011), pp1–21.

¹³ See Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols, (New York: Dover Publications, [1861–2] 1968).

¹⁴ John Scanlan, ‘In Deadly Time: The Lasting On of Waste in Mayhew’s London’, *Time & Society*, 16 (2/3), (2007), pp 189–206. doi: [10.1177/0961463X07080265](https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X07080265).

away for nineteenth century manufactured desires for *mechanical medicalisation* of decontaminated (dust-less) *sterile* beings.¹⁵ As twentieth century technological *infertility* mixed both organic and inorganic in its own rhetorical construction around



Sanding.

¹⁵ Robin E. Jensen, *Infertility: Tracing the History of a Transformative Term* (RSA Series in Transdisciplinary Rhetoric) (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2016).

women's "failing" bodies,¹⁶ what further parallels can be drawn between this and dust's now entrenched unproductive place in society, from its unwanted gathering in domestic dwellings we try not to see, to its clear enforced removal from institutional arenas?

I question how these women, quietly collecting in corners of the forum, feel about being labelled as infertile, and what it might mean to them as a constructed social identity. And, like the peculiar language of the dust trade, built informally from bodily gesture,¹⁷ what can the contemporary forum's linguistic formations add to the conversation, where women speak to themselves, plainly and symbolically from their lived bodily experience, using words that can fall outside of normative verbal understandings and power relations? Alongside metaphors, my project also investigates its powerful use of acronyms, which typically shorten the space of meaning within figurative language, excluding those who won't give the time to see what they really mean.



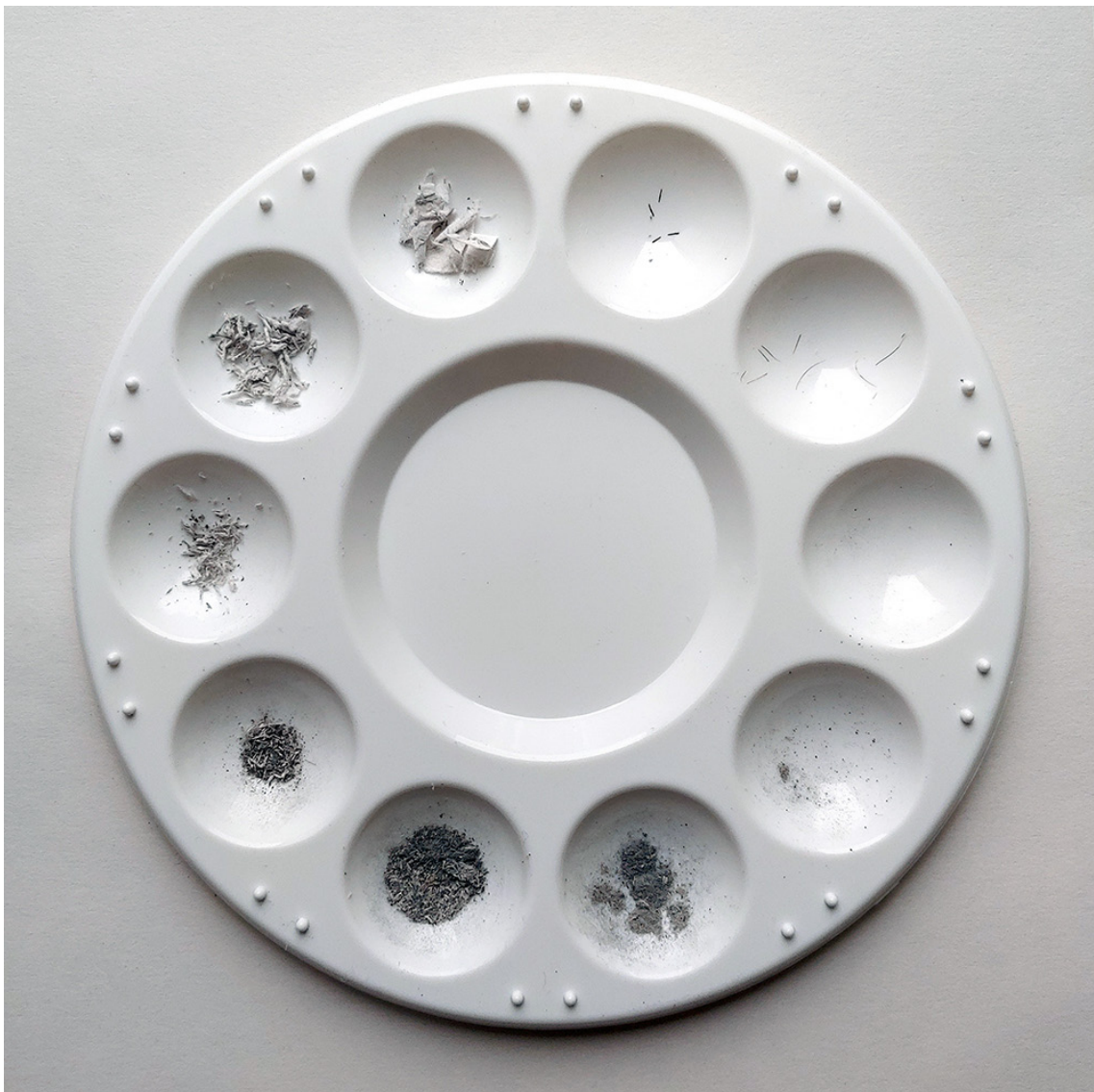
Sweeping.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 158.

Returning to my experiment, I watch as the body text finally all turns to dust. Letters fragmented from words and words detached from the page. But rather than closing gaps to leave nothing, there remains a space – an emptiness telling us there was once something there. And this now fills with a residue, the presence of the erased experience that remains forever visible as a material trace. The clarity of distinguished black and white marks on a screen becomes a disorderly grey smudge, ingrained on paper that is torn and tarnished with sediments of a process. Like those forum comments that are deleted, they give the *impression* they no longer exist, but they can never be completely removed by the user and leave behind a permanent trail of digital dust, signifying where the body had once been.

The rejected fragments now present themselves as a *new* dust before me, literally formless but not immaterial.



Sorting.

With a scientific eye, I methodically categorise the substances I find, observing changes within my lunar shaped pallet. I want to discard of *this* dust, real and dirty looking, representing a muddied medical might weighted heavily with reason, when sometimes no reason can be found. However, dust, Steedman (2001) reminds us, can never actually be surplus or ‘waste’, because it will never completely disappear; physiologically cells merely mutate into other beings.¹⁸ We need to rediscover productive value in what others have discarded. This new mattering lies out of linguistic grasp but becomes a visual embodiment of a laboured process that these women have endured. It *all* needs to matter, manifesting into real phenomena that goes far beyond the surface of an artwork.



Storing.

My actions here appear to have temporarily disrupted a narrative dictated by defined classifications of a “normal” reproductive body, but I know I cannot erase fear of failure within this medicalised monitored experience, just as much as these women cannot remove maternal hope, for themselves or others. Both become the body of work, and this remains a work in progress. There is a never-ending circularity to the whole narrative,¹⁹ where these women continually dust themselves off and try again. Who knows when the story will end?

¹⁸ Ibid p. 164.

¹⁹ See Steedman's reference to the circularity of the narrative of History itself, in *ibid*.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

