

Imogen Tyler and Lisa Baraitser

Private View, Public Birth: Making Feminist Sense of the New Visual Culture of Childbirth

Introduction

In the last three decades, there has been a dramatic increase in media representations of childbirth, notably within cinema, reality television and television drama, online video-sharing platforms, pornographic film, and in fine art practice. As yet, however, there is little feminist scholarship on the meanings and implications of this new visual culture of childbirth and its relationship to what has been described as ‘the taboo aesthetics of the birth scene’ (Tyler & Clements 2009; Tyler 2009a). This taboo aesthetics constructs the act of birth, especially the moment of crowning, and maternal experiences of pain and pleasure in childbirth, as taboo through the systematic occlusion of these aspects of childbirth in popular, medical and artistic representations. Until recently, the scene of birth has been represented, but staged around a series of lacunae, gaps or missing images, particularly of the maternal vagina ‘holding’ the head of the emerging foetus, and the maternal face in pain and pleasure, such that the birthing subject is both there and not there simultaneously. As the artist Jessica Clements (2009) points out, for instance, in relation to her study of medical texts depicting childbirth, ‘the photographs were cropped tightly on a draped body. They showed hands working on someone inanimate. Somewhere above the pubic bone or between the legs, scissors cut open a space’ (Tyler & Clements 2009, p. 134). Outside the important work of a small number of artists who opened up childbirth as a viable artistic subject during feminism’s second wave¹, and the medical, health and instructional contexts that have allowed, and yet simultaneously ‘confined’ its visualisation, childbirth has until recently remained ‘the great unseen’ of European culture.

Today the taboo of childbirth is being broken as birth is becoming routinely witnessed and represented in more graphic and public ways. If, as both European philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions have variously argued, maternal origin - the fact of our birth - is the obscene ‘open secret’, which we must psychologically disavow in order to emerge as distinct and bounded subjects (Beauvoir 1953; Arendt 1958; Kristeva 1986; Baraitser 2009a), then the new

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graphic visibility of birth within public culture is suggestive of a significant historical and psychosocial shift that bears close examination. It is not simply that representations of birth have multiplied and changed, but that the many different forms of public representation of birth raise their own social and political questions: What, for example, are the implications of birth taking its place alongside other mundane and everyday subjects that provide material for reality TV? What does it mean that women can now routinely make and watch home movies of themselves giving birth, and share those movies with a nebulous online ‘public’ around the world? How do we understand the emergence of those publics through the millions of ‘hits’ some birth movies are receiving on video-sharing platforms? What is the significance of the fact that a generation is now able to watch audio-visual footage of themselves being born? Given the way birth has been imagined as unrepresentable and unknowable in the history of philosophy, how might the new visual culture of birth change our understandings of the relation between representations of the female body, and maternal subjectivity and sexuality? And how might we understand an emergent feminist politics of these public cultures of birth? Finally, in a more theoretical register, do theories of abjection, so prominent in feminist scholarly and aesthetic work during the 1980s and 1990s, still offer helpful ways of understanding the simultaneity of over-exposure and selective sanitisation and normalisation of childbirth in prevailing media and televisual representations?

This paper explores some of the meanings and implications of this new visual culture of birth, and the challenges and opportunities it might present to feminist theory and feminist artistic and media practices. It begins with a brief introduction to the absence of ‘female birth’ within European thinking and its masculinist metaphorical appropriation. It then maps the shift in media and consumer cultures of pregnancy and birth out of which the current visibility of childbirth emerges, focusing on the rise of what we term ‘childbirth TV’. Finally, we consider a unique art collection in the UK dedicated to the subject of childbirth: the *birthrites collection*. This small but significant collection of contemporary artwork on childbirth is mobilised as a route into thinking through the theoretical implications of the visual culture of childbirth. We believe that the *birthrites collection* raises questions about the historical absence of images of birth and the periodicity with which this absence is briefly overturned and then reasserts itself in the history of art-making. However, we argue that the collection and its ambivalent reception in publicly funded museums and art spaces must also be read in the context of current reconfiguration of relations between birth, health and medicine and feminist theory and politics. The *birthrites*

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collection, for instance, is housed within institutions of midwifery and gynaecology, due in part to the difficulties the curators have experienced in getting the collection shown in art institutions. We therefore consider the ‘place’ of this collection more broadly, examining its symbolic value in the social and cultural imaginary; its political importance as a growing body of art works about birth; its function as a mode of questioning about what comes to ‘count’ as art and as feminist art practice more generally; and its role in understanding what ‘birth’ might come to mean in an era in which pregnancy and birth now saturate visual culture. Undertaking an analysis of four artworks from the collection, Hermione Wiltshire’s ‘Terese in Ecstatic Childbirth’ (2008), Helen Knowles’ ‘Heads of Women in Labour’ (2011) and ‘YouTube Series’ (2012) and Liv Pennington’s ‘Private View’ (2002-2010), we argue that it is imperative to move away from characterisations of birth that draw theoretically on abjection for their understanding of birth as taboo. Indeed, what is striking about many aspects of new popular and artistic representations of birth is that they have enabled the production of images and audio-visual materials that trouble an ‘abject aesthetics’ in which the maternal body must be ‘conceived’ and yet ultimately abjected and erased in order for the bounded human subject to emerge. In place of abjection, we conclude by arguing for a more thoroughly social and political account of the place of birth in contemporary culture, forms of ‘natal thinking’ that we contend the *birthrites collection* suggests.

Spectral Birth

In *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (1998), philosopher Christine Battersby notes that:

Reading many philosophers we might, indeed, suppose that man experienced himself first in isolation from others; that he never had to learn where the boundaries of his own self, his will and his freedom lie; and that he (or rather she) does not carry within himself (or rather herself) the gradual capacity to become two selves. [...] This lack of theorisation of birth - as if birth was just ‘natural’, something that simply happened before man ‘is’ - might be most evident in some continental philosophers (in Heidegger, for example, whose theorisation starts with an existent who is simply ‘thrown’ into the world) (Battersby 1998, p. 18).

In addition to being simply occluded from the philosophical imaginary, when birth has been theorised or represented within European philosophical, literary and artistic traditions, it is figured as a masculine property, the gift of men or male gods to male subjects – ‘Zeus-given’. Hannah Arendt (1958) describes this imaginary as one of ‘male birth’ (Arendt 1958, p. 63). Indeed, the Judeo-Christian tradition is littered with male births, metaphorical births imagined as

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divine acts of creation, in which life is passed from fathers to sons. Michelangelo's famous Sistine chapel painting, 'The Creation of Adam' (circa 1511) in which the finger of God gives life, is perhaps one of the most vivid visual depictions of male procreation. Not only do male gods engender male subjects, but in the work of philosophers from Plato through to Friedrich Nietzsche, reproductive metaphors, carefully parsed from their feminine form, are mobilised to describe capacities for producing thought, and for the engendering and reproduction of philosophy itself. In *Theaetetus* (360BC), for example, Plato famously describes philosophy as a labour akin to childbirth, and depicts Socrates as a midwife who attends 'men not women' and who looks after 'their souls when they are in labour, and not after their bodies' (Plato, [360 BC] 2008, p. 16). Writing in the 19th century, the same appropriative logic is central within Nietzsche's work, where material and spiritual pregnancy are imagined as strictly separate – women are associated with dumb materiality and men, the unfruitful sex, are pregnant with ideas (Hough 1997; Mullin 2002). As Battersby (1998) suggests, for philosophy to function *sui generis*, it has consistently eviscerated and/or appropriated women's reproductive capacities.

This foundational 'matricide' that inaugurates Western culture is a well-rehearsed feminist theoretical argument. Feminist philosophers have responded through critique, attempting to write birth back into the story of subjectivity and politics (Irigaray 1985; Walker 1998; Tyler 2000; Ettinger 2004; Jacobs 2007; Tyler 2009a; Baraitser 2009a; Baraitser 2009b; Baraitser & Tyler 2010), as well as embracing the psychic function of matricide within some areas of feminist psychoanalytic writing. For example, within Julia Kristeva's (1989) influential theorising of 'matricide' is the unconditional condition of *life itself*.² As she writes:

For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to autonomy. Matricide is our vital necessity, the *sine qua non* condition of our individuation (Kristeva 1989, p. 38).

However, other feminist theorists and philosophers have argued that these accounts of maternal abjection (and the matricide it assumes) relate not to some pre-historic, unchangeable fact but are, rather, 'disciplinary norms' that have been established through processes of reiteration (Irigaray 1985; Butler 1993). Indeed, over a forty-year period feminist scholars have variously traced, uncovered and critiqued the appropriation of birth and the correlative abjection of maternal subjectivity from European histories of thought and representation. The second-wave of feminism saw a plethora of feminist theologians, historians and archaeologists provide evidence and arguments about the centrality of matriarchal religions and 'birth-worship' customs and practices in pre-modern societies (Gimbutas 1974; Daly 1978; Starhawk 1979; Göttner-

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Abendroth 1987). This body of feminist work on matriarchy- whilst currently unfashionable - forces a reconsideration of the historical origins and purpose of myths and metaphors of ‘male birth’ and enables us better to question the sexual politics of not only psychoanalytic and philosophical accounts of maternal abjection, but the ways these discourses continue to shape material practices that subjugate women.

For example, the 1960s ushered in an era of what Lauren Berlant (1997) terms ‘fetal celebrity’—a consequence of ultra-sound and other medical imaging technologies, which not only transformed women’s experience of pregnancy and birth, but impacted significantly on the sphere of reproductive politics as the foetus became understood as a subject with its own social and civil rights (Berlant 1997, p. 124). A substantial body of feminist work has critically interrogated the social and cultural impact of foetal imaging technologies, particularly as regards to its role in the promotion of ‘pro-life’ politics (Petchesky 1987; Stabile 1994; Morgan & Michaels 1999). This scholarship has highlighted once more the ways in which maternal subjectivity is erased – this time by medical visual technologies - which reinforce the idea that the foetus has an identity that is ‘separate and autonomous from the mother’ (Petchesky 1987, p. 272). As Rosalind Petchesky (1987) argues, ‘the autonomous, free-floating fetus merely extends to gestation the Hobbesian view of born human beings as disconnected, solitary individuals’ (Petchesky 1987, p. 270). In response to these practices of maternal abjection, Petchesky argues that feminists should ‘restore women to a central place in the pregnancy scene’ (Petchesky 1987, p. 278). To do this, she states, ‘we must create new images that recontextualize the fetus, that place it back into the uterus, and the uterus back into the woman's body, and her body back into its social space’ (Petchesky 1987, p. 278).

Petchesky’s ‘demand’ is made in the late twentieth century, when first-person narration and visual representations of pregnancy and birth, which bear witness to their ‘unique temporality’ and the specific embodied and affective dimensions of birth, were still largely absent from both European conceptual paradigms and from visual media (Young 2005, p. 47). This absence was arguably compounded by a strand of work that emerged out of second-wave feminism which systematically identified women's reproductive capacities as the lynch pin of female oppression (Firestone 1970). As Carol Stabile (1994) notes, ‘an overarching goal [of the Second-wave] was to extricate “woman” from a purely reproductive status’ (Stabile 1994, p. 86). Indeed, the fear of ‘capitulating to ideologies that reduce women to a maternal essence’ has continued to limit feminist theorising on reproduction (Petchesky 1987, p. 288). Yet in the

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twenty-first century we have witnessed the emergence of a new visual culture of pregnancy and birth, a culture, which, albeit in potentially contradictory and problematic ways, ‘returns birth to women’.

Risking returning birth to women, and the birthing body to ‘social space’, is also central to the work of feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who in *Relating Narratives* (2000), develops an intricate philosophical account centred on ‘who’, rather than ‘what’ we are. Drawing explicitly on Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (1958), she theorises that each individual creates a residue of events and actions that can only be told in retrospect as ‘nothing but their life story’. ‘The meaning’ she writes, ‘that saves each life from being a mere sequence of events [...] consists [...] in leaving behind a figure, or something from which the unity of a design can be discerned in the telling of the story’ (Cavarero 2000, p. 2). The story always begins at the point that a person’s life begins. ‘*This* and not another; a mother who, by giving birth to him, has generated the ‘seasons’ of his entire existence, *this* existence and not another’ (Cavarero 2000, p. 11). Crucially, the specificity of birth, and of being birthed to this and not another mother can only be told by someone else who did not participate in the events. The desire to hear the story of our birth that we cannot remember, even if in some sense we participated in it, points us towards the fact that we are fundamentally dependent on others for our life story, and hence for our identity, our ‘who’. We ‘are’ through appearing to others, and therefore through the gaze of others. Hence our intense desire for our story to be told, for the gathering up of ‘nothing but our life story’ (Cavarero 2000, p. 2). Although Cavarero insists that it is the birthing mother who is the first other to whom the existent first appears, there are usually a whole host other others – friends, fathers, grandparents, siblings, midwives, strangers, and now these much wider ‘publics’, who we could say are being appealed to, to witness and tell the story of our birth.

The new visual culture of pregnancy and childbirth

In North America, Europe, Australasia (and much of Asia) today, if you open a magazine or newspaper or switch on a television before long you will encounter images, stories and/or audio-visual footage of pregnancy and childbirth. Indeed, depictions of pregnancy and childbirth are proliferating within popular culture (notably celebrity culture, reality television, advertising, cinema and social media), public culture (notably in the arenas of health and medicine) and arts practice (in painting and sculpture, performance art and video art, photography and mixed media). Previous claims that maternal representations have been contained within the highly

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regulated context of medical or religious spheres are challenged by this new 'maternal media culture' (Kristeva 1986). Without denying that 'ugly feelings' (Ngai 2005) such as disgust, revulsion, horror, or distaste still circulate in relation to the visualisation of childbirth, this diverse field of 'maternal aesthetics' has transformed previous notions of beauty, taste and disgust around reproductive bodies and practices. For example, it is important to recall that as recently as the mid-1990s feminist theorists were able to claim that 'pregnant bodies - even clothed - are sources of discomfort and disgust in popular culture' (Stabile 1994, p. 84), a statement that now appears nonsensical in the context of the mass-marketisation of pregnancy and birth and the broader neoliberalisation of reproduction.

For example, in the early 1990s a representational shift took place within popular culture as the figure of 'pregnant beauty' emerged, driven by celebrity and consumer culture. As Imogen Tyler (2001, 2011a) has detailed, the visual spectacle of the pregnant body, previously confined to clinics, hospitals and scientific or healthcare manuals – or to the avant-garde or pornographic margins – was suddenly and shamelessly everywhere, on the catwalk, dancing in pop videos, reading the news, acting in soap operas, featuring in advertising campaigns and spectacularly visible on cinema screens. If pregnancy was previously imagined as a passive, abject and ordinary physical state to be stoically borne in private, today pregnancy is a disciplinary 'body project' which women are instructed to covet and enjoy. Family photograph albums, which would have previously discreetly minimised or erased pregnant bodies, now foreground pregnancy, carefully staging changing body shape in poses that mimic celebrity photo shots. Within online communities, hundreds of thousands of 'belly shots' uploaded by women to track their changing shape can be found in specially created 'pregnancy galleries'. Pregnant women are also encouraged to adopt and participate in a 'pregnant consumer culture', which includes buying and wearing clothes that emphasise pregnant body shapes, joining pregnancy keep-fit classes, and consuming pregnancy magazines and television programmes on pregnancy and birth. In short, pregnancy had been 'discovered' as a lucrative market opportunity.

If the 1960s marked the rise of foetal celebrity, and the 1990s witnessed the breaking of a taboo on the visibility of the pregnant body, the noughties have seen the emergence of graphic representations of childbirth within the public sphere. Childbirth is now visible across a range of popular media; most notably childbirth has been marketised as mass entertainment in televisual forms.

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Childbirth TV

In the US the Discovery Channel's *Birth Day* (2003-2012) is one of several hugely popular television serials, which follow women through late pregnancy and into childbirth. In 'Roar Like a Tiger on TV?: Constructions of women and childbirth in reality TV' (2010) Camilla A. Sears and Rebecca Godderis offer a critical analysis of 24 episodes of another long-running US reality TV series, *A Baby Story* (The Learning Channel, 1998-2012). As Sears and Godderis detail, each episode of *A Baby Story* has a tightly scripted narrative, with footage edited into a pre-determined framework of sequences that produce a highly medicalised narrativisation of childbirth. Sears and Godderis conclude that *A Baby Story* reinforces North American ideological norms around heterosexuality, gender, reproduction and the medicalisation of birth. The same conclusion is reached by Theresa Morris and Katherine McInerney (2010) whose similar study of US-produced reality TV depictions of childbirth concludes with the claim that these hospital-based reality TV programmes depict 'women as powerless, physicians in control, and technology as the saving grace for women's imperfect bodies' (Morris & McInerney 2010, p. 140; VandeVusse & VandeVusse 2008).

These content-driven analyses are important since the impact of childbirth reality TV on wider understandings and experiences of childbirth is considerable. As Petchesky notes 'we do not simply imbibe our reproductive experience raw. The dominant images and codes that mediate the material conditions of pregnancy, abortion, and so forth, determine what, exactly, women "know" about these events in their lives, their meaning as lived experience' (Petchesky 1987, p. 280). This argument is supported by 'Listening to Mothers II: Report of the Second National U.S Survey of Women's Childbearing Experiences' (2006), which represented the findings of a survey of 1,573 participants who had given birth in a US hospital in 2005. The researchers found that 'far more mothers were exposed to childbirth through TV shows than through childbirth education classes' (Declercq et al. 2006). What this research suggests is that childbirth TV not only distorts women's perceptions of birth but creates a significant amount of fear about giving birth, which in turn shapes women's experience, behaviour and 'choices' about childbirth.

In the UK the situation is similar. In 2006 the reality television company Endemol brought British viewers *Birth Night Live* (2006), two hours of live television broadcast from a hospital maternity unit. This was followed by *One Born Every Minute* (2010), a BAFTA-winning reality programme, which is currently filming its fifth series. The dramatisation of birth within

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these hospital-based childbirth reality TV programmes is, like those in the US, limiting in its depiction of medicalised birth scenarios. Whilst, as British midwife Henrietta Otley (2012) argues, *One Born Every Minute* ‘demystifies the delivery suite setting’ and has ‘familiarised the public at large with the birth process’, the temporality of the editing processes and scripting of birth into televisual segments has led to what she describes as ‘performance anxiety’ amongst pregnant women (Otley 2012, p. 25). We might conclude that within much US and British childbirth TV, women are portrayed as largely passive subjects caught within the processes and practices determined by local cultural and social, health and medical structures. These televisual depictions of childbirth are undoubtedly limited in terms of the absence of possibilities they encode for imagining, experiencing or understanding birth outside of dominant systems of control and surveillance that characterise obstetric practices in the Global North. Perhaps more significantly, the fear they create feeds into and reproduces ideas of birth as a ‘crisis’ which needs to be managed to a successful conclusion by medical experts with the institutional (and increasingly corporatised) spaces of hospital settings. Responding to this politics of fear, childbirth educator Vicki Elson created a video essay titled ‘Laboring Under An Illusion: Mass Media Childbirth vs. The Real Thing’ (2009), which juxtaposed one hundred television and cinematic births with ‘real births’ in order to interrogate the misleading and sometimes terrorising impact of childbirth television.

In spite of its limitations, it is notable however that the market in ‘birth as entertainment’ television has diversified in Britain in recent years with the types of programming and the types of women depicted notably more diverse than those found in US studies. For example, alongside hospital-based childbirth reality shows there has been a growing focus on ‘teen’ pregnancy, birth and parenting in reality TV and documentary film-making. As their titles suggest, programmes such as *The Trouble with Girls: Three Girls and Three Babies* (BBC 3 2009), *Teen High Mum* (BBC 3 2009), *18 Pregnant Schoolgirls* (BBC 3 2009), *Underage and Pregnant* (BBC 3 2010-2012) and *Pramface Babies* (ITV 2009), produce a voyeuristic perspective on the ‘spectacle’ of young and often vulnerable single mothers (Tyler 2011b). In another twist, in 2012 a nostalgic 1950s-set costume drama, *Call the Midwife* (BBC 2012), became ‘the highest-rated original BBC drama series since records began’, underlying the centrality of childbirth as popular entertainment (Williams 2012). Interestingly, *Call the Midwife* not only ‘prompted a 17% increase in applications to midwifery courses’ but also a protest against declining midwifery positions (Ashley 2012).

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Whilst we acknowledge the problems and restrictions of genres such as hospital-based childbirth reality TV, and also the fact that the new visual culture of birth is driven by ‘the market’, it nevertheless poses a challenge to the abjection of maternal subjectivity from cultural space, by symbolically ‘returning birth to women’. As Zoe Williams (2012) states, just to see the drama of birth acknowledged is ‘somehow amazing’ at the same time that this visual culture ‘is fraught with new delusions, new disconnections between the ideal and the reality, new disappointments waiting to happen’ (Williams 2012).

The *birthrites* collection

It is the multiple and contested meanings of this new visual culture of birth, and attempts to critically engage with its meaning through forms of artistic practice, that are at the heart of the childbirth aesthetics produced by the artists associated with the *birthrites collection*. The artist Helen Knowles, one of the originators of the *birthrites collection*, describes it as ‘the first and only collection of contemporary artworks on the subject of childbirth’ in the contemporary art world (Knowles 2010a). The *birthrites collection* was established in 2009, following an initial *birthrites* exhibition, which opened at the Glasgow Science Centre and toured to the Manchester Museum in 2008. The collection now includes paintings and drawings by Matt Collier and Suzanne Holtom; photographic work by Hermione Wiltshire, Patrick Millard and Liv Pennington; ceramics and sculpture by Ping Qiu; wallpaper installation by Francesca Granato and Helen Knowles; artists’ books by Helen Knowles; and media installations and experimental films by Jaygo Bloom, Annabel Newfield and Andy Lawrence. In addition, it has recently received a donation of four works by Judy Chicago, from her birth project, ‘Through the Flower’ (made in collaboration with a number of textile workers between 1980-1985).

The *birthrites collection* is currently housed in the UK, between the Midwifery Department at Salford University in Greater Manchester and the Royal College of Gynaecology in London. A number of pieces in the collection were originally produced through collaborations between these artists and birth practitioners such as independent midwives and gynaecologists who came together to consider the social, cultural and political implications of current birth practices. Indeed, it is clear that the collection is ‘at home’ within the medical institutional context of women’s reproductive health, and is regularly drawn on as an important resource by a number of different groups and organisations, researchers and practitioners for educational purposes

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around the complex, diverse and politically charged practices of childbirth. By situating itself within and in relation to the very institutions (those of midwifery and gynaecology) that have contributed to the current medicalised practices of birth, the *birthrites collection* has played an important function in allowing historical and prevailing understandings of birth to be opened up to reflection, critique and analysis. However, it appears that the collection has been less welcomed by major public art-spaces, by curators of art shows, or commentators on contemporary art practice. As Knowles notes in relation to the first *birthrites* exhibition, ‘we didn't originally intend to show it in science venues. We intended it for art galleries. But what we're finding is that there's still a lot of fear around the subject matter’ (Knowles 2010a).

Capturing Crowning

The physical act of childbirth, that most primary element of human experience, has rarely been explored in fine art, even whilst other socially taboo bodily experiences are now regularly depicted and communicated for their ‘shock value’. Most taboo it seems is the moment of separation when the mother is pushing the child out of her body. As the London-based artist Hermione Wiltshire asks in her work, ‘Why is the actual moment of crowning so difficult to look at, visualize and think about?’ (Wiltshire 2009). As part of a *birthrites*-initiated project, Wiltshire spent time observing women in NCT³ ante-natal classes, and noted the absence from these classes of images of the moments of birth itself. The NCT teacher felt images of crowning would traumatise pregnant women, and crowning is also edited out of reality TV depictions of birth. Wiltshire responded to this absence with the exhibition of a photograph: ‘Terese crowning in ecstatic childbirth’ (figure 1) reproduced from radical midwife, Ina May Gaskin’s book, ‘Ina May’s guide to childbirth’ (Gaskin 2003). This photograph is dense with social and political meanings and in re-presenting this image in the first *birthrites exhibition* in 2008, Wiltshire raised questions about the relation between fragile and threatened radical midwifery practices and equally precarious feminist arts practices.

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Figure 1: 'Terese crowning in ecstatic childbirth' from *Ina May's guide to childbirth*, Hermione Wiltshire, 2008, black and white photograph, the birthrites collection. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

There is no doubt that there is something shocking about this image – its graphic exposure of the birthing moment seems to cut across the traditional 'taboo aesthetics' of birth we discussed earlier, in which just such a moment is obscured or hidden whilst being alluded to through the effects of certain stagings of the scene of birth. The photograph certainly creates an affective disturbance, so much so that curators in the galleries that showed the *birthrites exhibition* have attempted to 'hide' the image, or have pronounced it too shocking to show. Whilst midwives in Salford University Midwifery Department, where the photograph now has a permanent home,

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covered the emerging baby's head, with 'post-it' notes in order, we might imagine, to protect the mother's privacy in this moment of 'ecstasy' and to ring-fence a sacred scene.

Crowning is a scene which many feel we just do not need to, or *should not* look at. And yet, we do look. There is something both compelling and disturbing about the 'thing' emerging from 'Terese's' vagina – not yet baby, no longer foetus, radically indeterminate and unknown, it is clearly the source of her pleasure. We don't know what, or rather who, that 'thing' is. It is tempting to understand the disturbance this image of crowning creates by viewing it through the lens of maternal abjection, and the figure of the monstrous-maternal that has been well charted in the feminist analysis of science fiction and horror films and depictions of 'alien' reproduction (Creed 1993; Braidotti 2002). 'Terese crowning in ecstatic childbirth' also recalls the psychoanalytic writing of Jacques Lacan (1982), who offered an account of the ecstasies of the mystical saint Teresa as evidence that the sexuality of women is 'beyond language' (Lacan 1982). To illustrate this claim, Lacan argued that Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture 'The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa', in which an angel stands over Teresa with a golden arrow as she reclines in a state of ecstasy, was all the 'evidence' required to prove that female sexuality is 'unspeakable' pleasure, a sexuality 'beyond the phallus' which he termed 'jouissance'. As he writes:

You have only to go and look at Bernini's statue in Rome to understand immediately that she's coming, there is no doubt about it. And what is her jouissance, her coming from? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it (Lacan 1982, p. 145).

Lacan's account of female sexuality as 'mute' is yet another form of abjection and there is now a rich body of feminist critiques and retorts to Lacan's misogynistic silencing of women's sexuality (e.g. De Lauretis 1994; Grosz 1994; Campbell 2000). Nevertheless, the relationship between these two Teresa's, between Bernini's sculpture 'The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa' (1652) and 'Terese crowning in ecstatic childbirth' is nevertheless striking. Whilst Bernini's Teresa derives her pleasure from an encounter with an angel, Terese's ecstasy is disconcerting because of the double-reading of childbirth and sexual pleasure which it suggests. In other words, if 'Terese crowning in ecstatic childbirth' shocks, it is because it depicts birth as an intensely sexual and perhaps auto-affective experience. Its intensity lies in particular in the juxtaposition between a moment of completion or fullness, and an unmistakable cleft in both mother (here represented by the gap between her teeth that is revealed through her delight) and the emerging baby's crown. As our eye moves between the mother's ecstatic face, and the emerging crown, what draws them together, what relates one to the other is the shared cleft. We cannot, however, hold

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both in view simultaneously. To see one is to lose sight of the other. We have to choose where our gaze falls in the moment. Had the mother's face not been visible, had the moment of crowning remained in the abstract, a generic 'baby' emerging from a generic vagina, we would suggest the photograph would shock less. What is perhaps difficult is to acknowledge, and therefore what is disturbing in this image, is simply that a birth involves a particular mother (albeit surrounded by a group of others) – not a mother who has disappeared, who is 'abject' or 'psychotic' as Kristeva has suggested, in the moment of splitting, but who is fully present in her ecstasy, and in her specificity.

One of the most striking aspects of televisual dramatisations of birth is that despite the ways it normalises birth as a medical condition to be 'treated' and its depictions of mothers as 'patients', it frequently manages to capture and convey the euphoria of birth for women. Indeed, as the predominately female audience responses to these programmes suggest, it is the overwhelming affectivity of these dramatisations of childbirth which make childbirth reality TV such compelling viewing⁴. Yet despite the saturation of popular culture with these graphic and often deeply affective dramatisations, the abject response of both midwives and gallery curators to 'Terese crowning in ecstatic childbirth' suggests that 'crowning' remains a specifically taboo or offensive scene which must be censored. By presenting this still image of birth as sexual ecstasy, one of the questions Wiltshire's work poses is 'how do we make "feminist sense" of these representations of maternal pleasure - and the diverse forms of response these images generate in different social and viewing contexts?'

Ecstatic Labour

Helen Knowles' work focuses on exploring and capturing these ambivalent moments of physical separation and psychological splitting that characterise 'Terese crowning in ecstatic childbirth' (Wiltshire 2008). In her current art practice, Knowles engages in what she terms 'plundering' cultural images of birth from YouTube videos. In her forays into online birth videos, Knowles is seeking to capture those moments when birth occurs, producing large-scale screen-prints from screen-grabs of women's faces 'exhaling and reclining at the moment the baby crowns' (Knowles 2010b). Knowles' method, making screen prints from a digital projector, is an unusual one. The process involves finding and watching digital, audio-visual videos of childbirth, capturing still images from these films, projecting these images onto large pieces of hand-made Fabriano paper and transforming them into still art-objects: aesthetic and material objects which attempt to

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'capture' the act of crowning in its extremity and liminality. Due to the highly pixelated images that emerge from this process, from a distance it is possible to glimpse something deeply pleasurable coursing through these birthing women, and yet the closer you get the image, the harder it is to make visual sense of the moment they depict. In this sense, Knowles explores the appearance and disappearance of the ecstatic maternal subject as she separates from the subject who is birthed, both literally separating out as a series of dots as we move towards the images.

The first series of art-works produced as part of her *Ecstatic Labour* series, 'Heads of Women in Labour' (2011), consists of four large black and white screen prints of women's faces at the point of crowning, captured from YouTube videos (figures 2-5). On the 'Heads of Women in Labour' series Knowles asks:

Why does the ecstatic image of a woman's face [...] become significant when you realise it is actually appropriated from YouTube, posted by the woman herself, as a record of her birth? The intimate narrative of birth played out on the internet is of course 'family viewing' and yet it opens up the taboo yet undeniable link between sex and birth challenging the separation between women as mothers and women as sexual entities (Knowles 2010b).



Figure 2-5: Helen Knowles 2011 'Heads of Women in Labour': Youtube screengrab 'Chase Andrews waterbirth', Youtube screengrab Annabel's birth, Youtube screen grab of 'Shiloh's quick and peaceful waterbirth', Youtube screen grab German birth video, 'Chase Andrews waterbirth', all 61cm x 61cm, Screen prints of Fabriano. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Interestingly, childbirth reality television emerged out of a grassroots trend amongst parents to record childbirth on home video cameras. As digital video cameras have further 'democratised' film-making, the movement to film childbirth has grown. The emergence of online video-sharing platforms (such as YouTube) now means that millions of graphic and often unedited 'home-made' childbirth films can now be viewed online. The feminist geographer Robyn Longhurst (2009) undertook a small-scale, qualitative research project in 2008, which involved viewing and making notes on several hundred online videos of birth on YouTube and analysing the accompanying posts and commentaries about the videos. Longhurst also concluded, perhaps unsurprisingly, that whilst these films have the potential to open up new ways of perceiving birth they also typically privilege specific cultural - notably US - experiences of childbirth, and present a largely homogenous and medicalised perspective on birth practices. However, in her

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engagement with YouTube birth films, Knowles transforms the normativity and banality of ‘disposable’ videos of childbirth, ordinarily consumed online in spaces of privacy, into screen captured art-works that evoke a ‘sacred’ aesthetic and become tangible material objects, to be contemplated and considered within the public space of the gallery.

The taboos that unfold from the consideration of the relationship between sex, sexuality and childbirth in this work, are relentlessly pursued by Knowles. For example, the provocatively titled “‘Раждане с оргазъм’ Birth with orgasm’ (2012, figure 6)⁵, is one of a series of large digital screen prints, in which the pixelated quality of the screen grabs is transformed in screen printing process into highly textured images of women’s ‘childbirth ecstasy’.

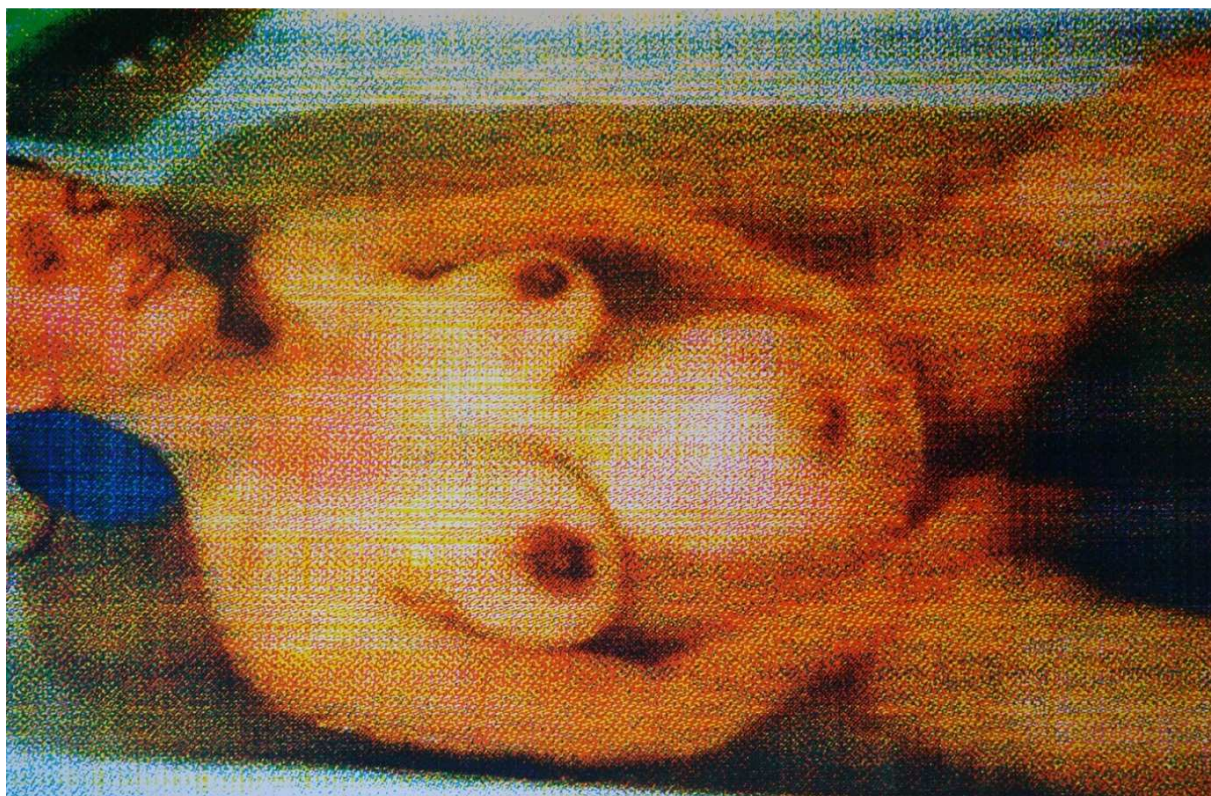


Figure 6: Helen Knowles, 2012 ‘Раждане с оргазъм’ Birth with orgasm <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDyUbZW29ts>, Four Colour Screen’ print on Fabriano 1/3 95.5.cm x 146cm 2012 Edition of 3. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

On our reading, this work is about ecstasy in the etymological sense of what it means to be *moved outside of oneself*: birthing is depicted here as an extreme and borderline event, but also paradoxically an ordinary and everyday experience of becoming more than one. As Knowles’ work suggests, this ecstasy is at once captured and uncapturable: in the case of the ‘YouTube series’ this uncapturability is communicated by the way in which the image ‘dissolves’ into

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incomprehensible details of colour as the viewer approaches and gets close-up to the image (figure 7). If, as Battersby argues, ‘we are lacking models that explain how identity might be retained whilst impregnated with otherness, and whilst other selves are generated from within the embodied self’ (Battersby 1998, p. 18), then Knowles’ work attempts precisely to communicate the paradox of what is knowable about women’s experiences of birth at the material limits of self/other relationality.

What is perhaps most interesting about Knowles’ work on the ecstasies of birth is that it refuses an abject or monstrous paradigm, insisting instead on the experience of birth as a distinctly erotic and aesthetic experience of creation. At their full size, printed on heavy yet fragile paper, that are exquisite and glamorous images of women, that hint at Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe prints (Warhol 1962). Birth emerges here as an experience that poses a distinctly feminist challenge to the mute passivity attributed to the birthing subject, and to the appropriation of birth as a metaphor for male artistic creation.

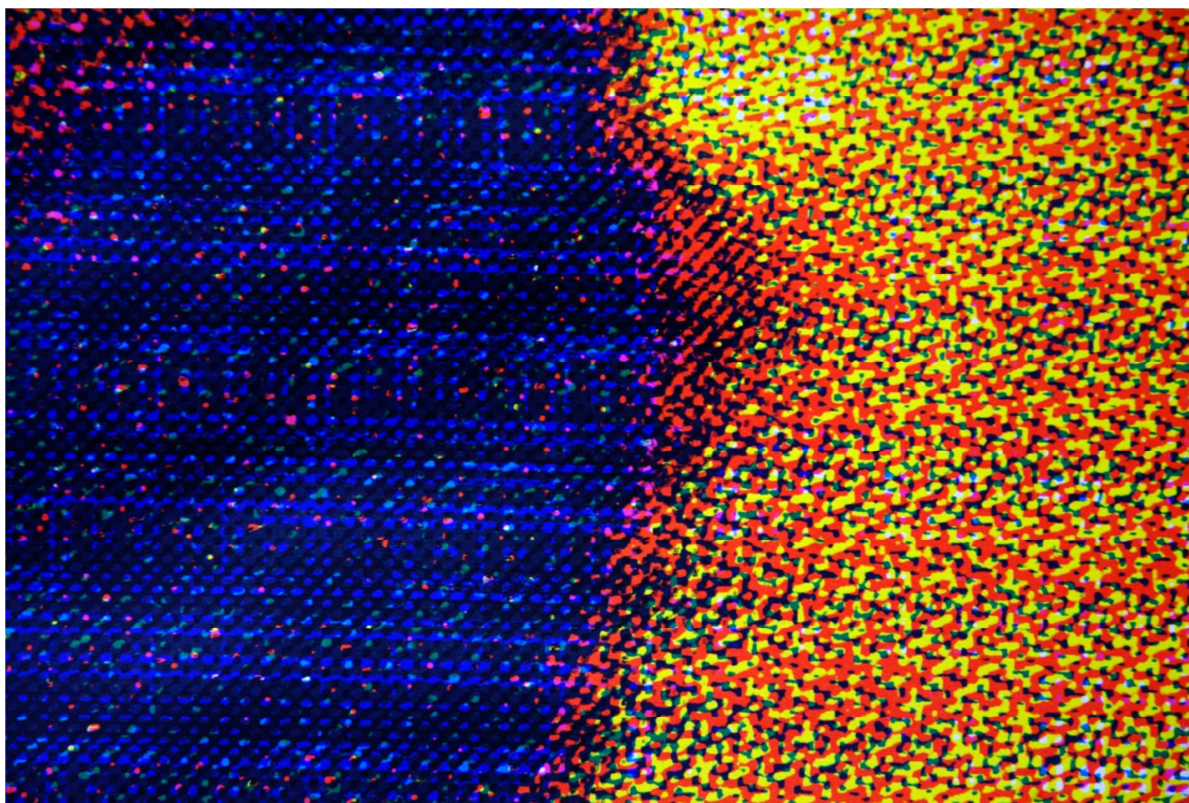


Figure 7: ‘Helen Knowles, 2012 detail of ‘Раждане с оргазъм’ Birth with orgasm <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDyUbZW29ts>, Four Colour Screen’ print on Fabriano 1/3 95.5.cm x 146cm 2012 Edition of 3. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

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Private View/Public Birth

Liv Pennington's performance and photographic piece, 'Private View' (2002 – 2010), approaches the question of birth, its public place, its 'commonality' and its representational politics from a different perspective from Wiltshire and Knowles. To date, 'Private View' as a performance has taken place in bars and clubs in London, Poitiers, Oslo and Manchester. In this performance, women who come to use the toilets are asked if they will take a pregnancy test. The indicating windows of the pregnancy test are relayed live in real-time above the bar on a screen every two-to-three minutes. As Pennington notes, 'There wasn't any sound and the pregnancy tests were broadcast anonymously. If the women wanted to know their result they would go straight to the bar. [...] There isn't any broadcasted sound, just the ambient background noise of people socialising, flirting, networking, whilst they are drinking and queuing for drinks' (Pennington, 2010). The photographic exhibition of this work is a composite print of forty different women's pregnancy tests from the London performance, combined with text written by the women as they were waiting to take their test (figure 8).

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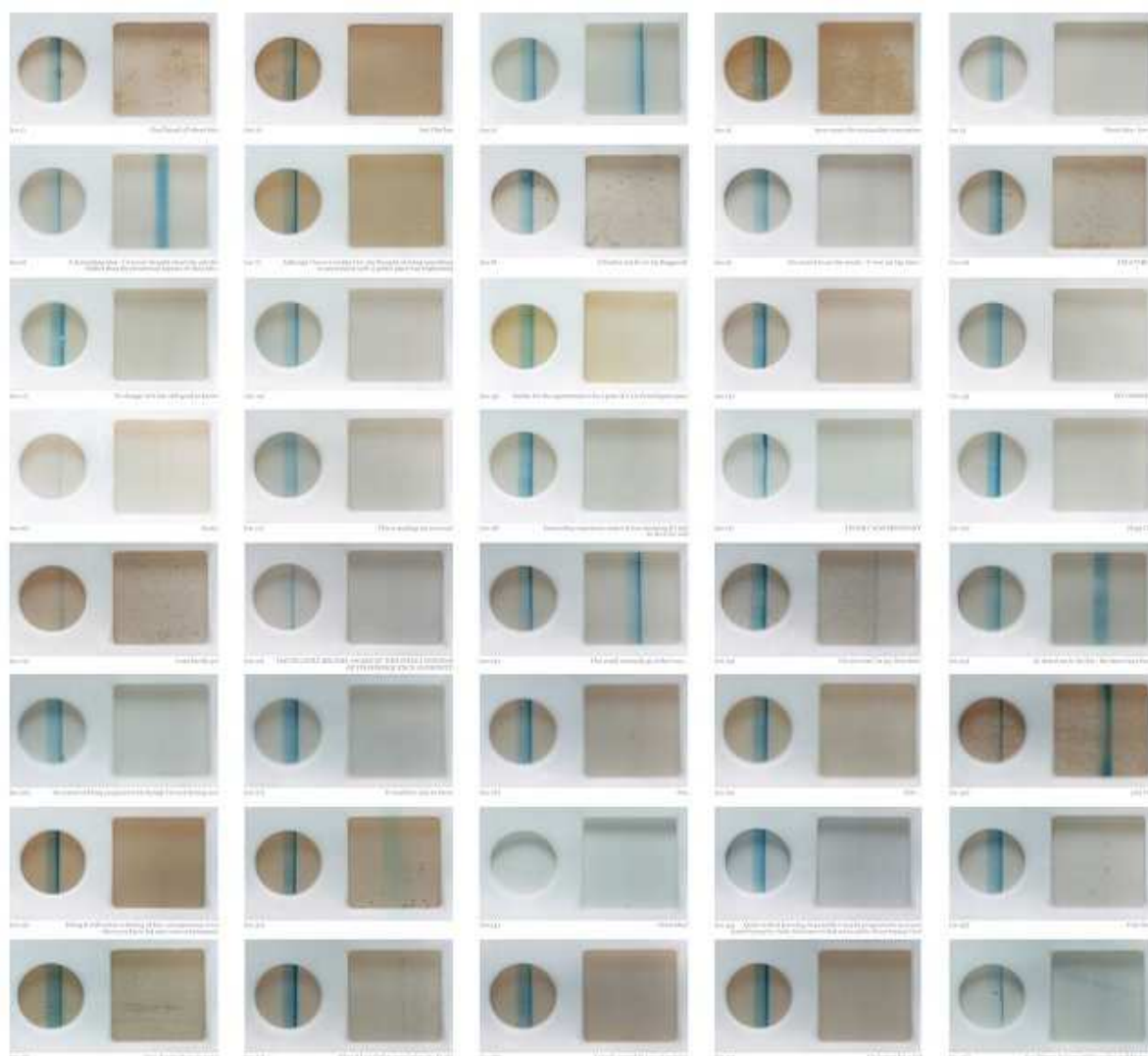


Figure 8: Liv Pennington, 2006, 'Private View' Digital C type on Aluminium, 80 x 76 cm, birthrites collection. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Pennington's composite print evokes minimalist art (notably the work of Ben Nicholson) and a longer tradition of abstraction: of grids, squares and circles, of the repetition of form and the minutiae of small differences. But here these repetitions of form refer to sticks which have been peed on by women in toilets of clubs and bars; their differences in colour is a consequence of their soaking and staining with urine. They are a material rendering, in other words, of hormonal changes in women's bodies, and are a consequence of scientific and technological developments that have transformed the meaning and experience of reproduction. This adds a social and political dimension to Pennington's 'Private View'. The title speaks severally to the non-place of

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birth in the history of art, to the marginality of women and particularly mothers as artists, and to the making public of birth that has been taking place over the last decade. It is crucial to the performance that the results of the tests are displayed publically on a screen above the bar. What is usually a very private moment is graphically displayed in a space of sociality – a space in which women both participate and are viewed.

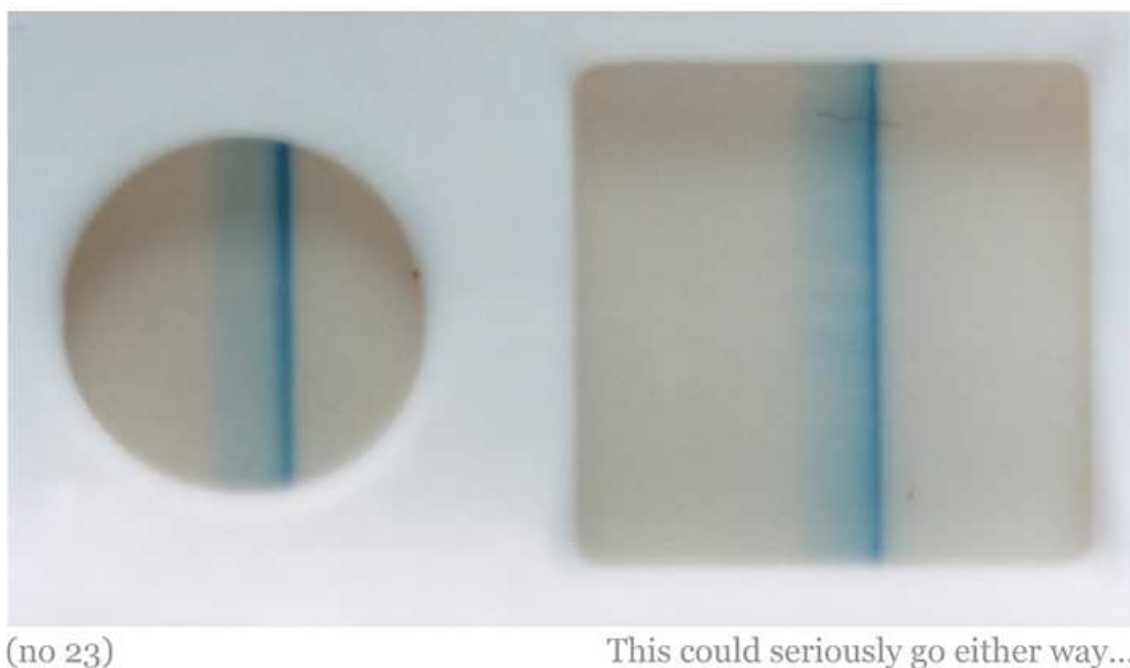


Figure 3: Liv Pennington, 2006, 'Private View' [detail] Digital C type on Aluminium, 80 x 76 cm, birthrites collection. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

The questions raised by Pennington's work form part of a deeper and longer genealogy of 'birth' that includes understanding childbirth and women's reproductive capacities not as a 'private' affair, but as a key site for bio-politics (Foucault 2007). Foucault's theory of bio-power is grounded in the idea that a break occurred in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries between forms of governance that centred on the right of sovereign power to kill, and forms of governance that focused on 'the administration and promotion of life-forces such as population growth' (Federici 2004, p. 16). However, as Silvia Federici suggests, whilst Foucault offers ample evidence for this shift, he fails to account for *why* it occurred. She argues that, 'if we place this shift in the context of the rise of capitalism [...] the promotion of life-forces turns out to be nothing more than the result of a new concern with the accumulation and reproduction of labor-

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power' (Federici 2004, p. 16). This was an historical context in which a new concept of human beings as 'raw materials' for industrial capitalism emerged (Heckscher in Federici 2004, p. 88). If capitalism needed ways to manage and control the supply of labour, then women's social role as the producers and reproducers of labour power (people) made them (along with the colonised peoples of the empire) the specific targets for the institution of the biopolitical regimes of control that Foucault described. Federici details the war that was waged against women in this period, which 'aimed at breaking the control they had exercised over their bodies and reproduction' (Federici 2004, p. 88). This included campaigns of fear and terror epitomised by the European witch-hunts, the legal imposition of penalties against contraception, abortion and infanticide, and extraordinary surveillance measures put in place to monitor and control reproductive practices. What Federici's work suggests is that theories and practices of maternal abjection were shaped and effected by the emergence of a system of global capitalism which required the alienation of women from reproductive labour (Tyler 2013).

Today, a potent mixture of geneticisation, new imperialism and neoliberalism has further instrumentalised 'life itself' (Haraway 1997, p. 143). The surveillance and control of reproduction is played out through the entrenchment of systems of 'technocratic childbirth' (Davis-Floyd 1992), the material political struggles of 'pro-life' debates and in the wider forms of inequality, injustice and discrimination daily faced by women in private and public life. Further, whilst a fear of 'essentialism' still pervades feminist theorising around birth, the fact remains that whether a woman 'is lesbian, infertile, post-menopausal or childless', she will still be assigned 'a subject-position linked to a body that has perceived potentialities for birth' (Battersby 1998, p. 16).

It is in this context that a new visual culture of birth has arisen. This visual culture of birth is undoubtedly driven by neoliberal ideologies of marketisation, yet as the *birthrites collection* suggests, it also provides an opportunity for us to rethink the sexual politics of birth. By positioning the *birthrites collection* in relation to broader changes in the visual culture of birth, one of the things we hope to have begun is a shift of critical commentary away from theoretical paradigms that reproduce the association between birth, maternity and abjection. Indeed, of the things that is interesting and important about the *birthrites collection* is the ways in which it refuses maternal abjection, including the 'marketisation' of women's bodily and reproductive experiences, by participating in a 'strategic valorisation' of the new visual culture of birth as site/sight through which to restage women's reproductive autonomy.

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Natal Politics

We are all born. This alarmingly simple statement is derived from Hannah Arendt's (1958) work on natality, and emphasises our condition as natals rather than mortals.⁶ Working against a long philosophical tradition that has given primacy to the shared horizon of death, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt stated that 'natality and not mortality, may be the central category of political thought' (Arendt 1958, p. 9). When Arendt talks about politics, she is referring to the capacity to speak and act in the public sphere. Natality is distinct from the mundane everyday practices of mothering, which for Arendt remain tied to the violence and meaninglessness of the private sphere. In contrast, politics, for Arendt, occurs when people who are equals come together to discuss and debate their differences, without aim, and without knowing what the outcome of such debate will be. In this sense, politics is, by definition, always a new beginning, and is therefore linked with an originary beginning – that of birth itself. Without understanding natality as the ground of being, we cannot have politics. In defining the capacity to begin as specifically human, and unique to humans, Arendt follows Augustine's statement: 'That there be a beginning, man was created, before whom nobody was' (Augustine 354-430 AD [1998]). This beginning that birth inaugurates, then, is the foundational fact of all thought, politics and action. Without the potentially transformational category of natality there can be no freedom, no social change, and no human future. 'Birth' can then be understood as an ontological category – a category that brings 'beginning' into being. Although Arendt's notion of natality insists on separating *the concept of birth* (natality), from *subjects who birth* (mothers), and is always in danger of being read as yet another account of 'birth without women', nevertheless, we want to conclude by suggesting that the new visual culture of birth also calls for a new 'natal politics'. Without a natal politics – without, that is, harnessing birth as a *symbolic* category that gives rise to freedom, social discourse, action and social change – contemporary visualisations of birth are in danger of becoming simply banal. Despite the very real and important effects of women sharing visual birth stories with one another, and of overturning the taboo aesthetics of birth, a natal politics would insist on natality as not just an experience we have in common, but a metaphor for a mode of sharing words and deeds in public space that allows for the appearance of transformational beginnings. This, we would suggest, takes us towards an articulation of a 'maternal commons' (Tyler 2013) where recognising what we share, what we have in common, is also a political act.

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Finally, one crucial way in which such a maternal commons might operate is in the very field of feminist scholarship on birth and motherhood itself. Too often feminist scholarship and feminist art practice on the theme of birth and motherhood has remained atomised, each generation writing as though stumbling into motherhood for the first time, needing to repudiate or overturn the insights from the generation before, or decrying why their mothers never fully told them what it would really be like. Whilst the new visual culture of birth might lead to a democratisation of information and knowledge about birth, there is still a need to resolve these questions inter-generationally - to recognise that the politics of birth *is* the politics of generation. To position birth, and those who birth, at the centre of public life (i.e. to think natality in its metaphorical significance as well as its potential in material form), we need to find ways for birth to be *inherited* not just exposed. Reworking or rather *literalising* Arendt's notion of 'natality' is, we have suggested, a useful way of considering the feminist theoretical and political implications of the losses and possible gains of the new visual culture of birth.

¹ For significant examples of feminist art works on the maternal, see for example, Nancy Spero's *Female Bomb* (1966); Monica Sjoo's *God Giving Birth* (1968); Judy Chicago's *Birth Project* (1980-1985); Frida Kahlo's *My Birth* (1932); Paula Rego's *Abortion Series Set of 8 Etchings Untitled IV* (1999), and Louise Bourgeois' *The Birth* (2007). For recent critical feminist writing on maternal art, see Betterton (2010) and Liss (2009).

² Kristeva's account of the abjection of maternal origin relies upon her crafting of a deeply ambiguous conceptual status for motherhood, which is founded in a distinction between the maternal as abstract thing and the maternal as lived and embodied modes of being (Kristeva 1986). We reject this distinction here (see also Tyler 2009b).

³ The NCT is a childbirth and parenting charity in the UK, which began life in 1956 as *The Natural Childbirth Trust*, before changing its name to *The National Childbirth Trust* and finally to *NCT*. Whilst its scope has expanded, it is still strongly associated with 'natural' childbirth today (Roberts et al. forthcoming).

⁴ Online blogs, such as those collected on sites such as mumsnet, are replete with accounts of the pleasures of the emotions invoked by childbirth reality TV.

⁵ Раждане с оргазъм is Bulgarian, and translates as 'Birth with Orgasm'.

⁶ The shift in thinking from mortality to natality is taken up a number of feminist philosophers including Adriana Cavarero (2000), Luce Irigaray (1985) and Christine Battersby (1998), and more latterly by Rachel Jones (2007), Alison Stone (2010), Lisa Guenther (2006) and Alison Martin (2002), all of whom focus us on the philosophical importance of the commonality of birth.

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