

Re-viewing Feminist Influences in Transnational Art: A Multimodal, Fugal Analysis of Mary Kelly's Texts of 'Maternal Desire'

Ruth Skilbeck, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Abstract: The 1970s women's art movement is a foundational influence in transnational contemporary art. Developing an innovative, multimodal, fugal approach the paper discusses the formative influence of American feminist conceptual artist Mary Kelly's representations of 'the intricacies of maternal desire,' in her work based on her own experience of parturition. The discussion focuses on an interview with Mary Kelly and artist son Kelly Barrie by Ruth Skilbeck at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008 Sydney Biennale, and includes her photographs of Kelly and Barrie within their collaborative video installation Antepartum 1973 and Astralfields and Other Manifestations 2008, exhibited at the Biennale. With reference to early pieces including Post-Partum Document 1972-78, the paper argues that not only are Kelly's works highly significant in their own right, radically bringing together conceptual art and feminist self-based narrative art; as constitutive, canonical texts of the 1970s women's art movement, they initiated new multimodal forms of contemporary art and modes of dialogic textual expression that have formatively influenced the development of contemporary art and its intergenerational, social and cultural communication in transnational culture.

Keywords: Feminist Conceptual Art, Psychoanalysis and Art, Transnational Contemporary Art, Art Criticism



Figure 1: Mary Kelly and Kelly Barrie photographed by Ruth Skilbeck at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008 Sydney Biennale opening

Feminist Art Review

RE-VIEWING INFLUENCES OF the 1970s women's art movement in the development of international contemporary art and the artworld is an increasing and timely trend at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. This is particularly significant in relation to transnational art as the 1970s women's art movement was a cross-cultural and transnational movement. Recent re-evaluations of the impacts of 1970s feminist art in landmark exhibitions and symposia include WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution (2007), Feminism Now—New Feminist Art Scholarship (2009), rebelle, Art and Feminism 1969–2009 (2009), Cooling Out—on the paradox of feminism (2008), Global Feminisms (2007).¹ In addition to these events, numerous recent publications of significant feminist art scholarship have evaluated the impacts of feminism on contemporary art.²

One of the ongoing innovations of the 1970s women's art movement, that coincided with a decline in traditional forms of criticism, was the development of new forms and modes of art writing. As the art world expanded, this brought a new focus on cross-cultural communication; traditional unitary categories of criticism were joined by experimental *écriture féminine* that rethought concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, and brought together creative and critical modes of writing. Within this expanding cultural and theoretical context, the discussion in this paper uses a form of critical analysis informed by the multivalent fugue (with dual musical and psychological meanings), and my practice as an arts writer, to review the work of American conceptual artist, Mary Kelly.

Transnational Conversations Remix

Kelly's recent and current work reflects on her feminist art and activism in the public sphere, and the part she played as a leading figure in the women's art movement in London in the 1970s. Now based in Los Angeles, the four works in her installation *Love Songs: Multi Story House* 2005, made in collaboration with husband Ray Barrie, recast a new generation of young women in the restaging of activist events, including *WLM Demo Remix* 2005, and *Flashing Nipple Remix* 2005 that revisits a protest outside the 1974 Miss World Contest. The centerpiece illuminated 'house' of Kelly's 2006 Documenta installation enacts a transnational 'conversation' between texts by women from new global economies placed on the outer walls, and texts by artists from the 1970s women's movement displayed inside.

Kelly's use of 'remix' in the titles of her pieces alludes to the postmodern musical practice of sampling and remixing, an electronic music practice that has origins in fugal modalities of thematic variation. Kelly's use of this strategy in 'remixing' her own work, has several overt effects: in bearing witness to the original events, and reviewing their significance, her use of the concept of 'remix' also subverts the idea that an artwork has 'one' fixed meaning or form and suggests instead that art-making may be a process-based project that evolves over time. Her collaboration with her son, artist Kelly Barrie, in their piece *Antepartum* 1973

¹ Further exhibitions and symposia include Personal and Political (2002), Witness to her Art (2006), Art and the Feminist Revolution (2007), Global Feminisms (2007).

² Recent publications include Griselda Pollock's *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (2007). Jayne Wark's *Radical Gestures: Feminist Performance Art in North America*, 2006. McGill-Queens University Press. Carol Armstrong and M. Catherine de Zegher's edited *Women Artists at the Millennium*. MIT Press, 2006. Eleanor Heartney and Helaine Posner's *After the Revolution: Women who Transformed Contemporary Art*, Prestel Publishing, 2007.

and *Astralfields and Other Manifestations* 2008, is another 'remix' which reflexively repositions Mary Kelly's Super 8 film of herself pregnant (with her son Kelly) in 1973, in a visual, conceptual dialogue with a video work made in response to his mother's film by Kelly Barrie then aged 36, in 2008. The collaborative installation was made for and exhibited at the 2008 Sydney Biennale, *Revolution – forms that turn*, curated by Carolyn Christiv-Bakargiev, where I interviewed and photographed the artists within their installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art.³

Re-thinking the Art of Motherhood

One of the pressing 'identity' issues for 1970s women artists concerned motherhood and liberation. How could a woman be politically radical, artistically innovative, and a mother?⁴ Some feminists opposed motherhood on the grounds that it shackled women to oppressive roles of the 'patriarchal mother.'⁵ But others, Kelly included, found alternative, liberational ways of thinking about how women who wanted a child could 'break the old circuits' to quote *écriture féminine* innovator, Helene Cixous.⁶ Some feminist artists and writers contested phallogocentric theories of women's cultural 'lack' in the theory of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.⁷ Filling the gap with empowering 'maternal metaphors' such as those voiced by Cixous, who declared that rather than 'depriving the woman of a fascinating time in the life of her body...It will be the task of woman and man ...to think the *launching* of a new subject into life, with defamiliarization.'⁸ Mary Kelly, whose work deconstructs Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse, constructed a new way of 'becoming-mother becoming-artist,' in the public sphere, through interrogating the discursive subject construction of motherhood, in her monumental six-part series installation *Post-Partum Document 1973–79*, which documented the first six years of her son's life. Although it has long since entered the canon of contemporary art, the work caused a 'scandal' when its first sections were exhibited at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1976, generating controversy over its aesthetic form and its content (which included material objects of motherhood, such as diaper liners).

In my analysis of Mary Kelly and Kelly Barrie's works I will discuss *Post-Partum Document*, in counterpoint to *Antepartum* and *Astralfields and Other Manifestations*. I apply a multi-modal, fugal critical analysis using conceptual terms of *fugal recursion* and *fugal modality*, transposed from music, to discuss reflexivity, becoming, and remixing⁹ in Kelly's work. The purpose of using musical analogies in critical inquiry is that music constitutes an expression of social relations whether in actual or transcendent (ideal) form. Variations of fugue forms are found in diverse musical forms in postmodern and contemporary transnational culture, from sampling and remixing (including breaks remix and breaks beats), global urban hip-hop, mashups, to vocal polyphony of world music.¹⁰ Conversely, musical

³ I interviewed Mary Kelly and Kelly Barrie at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art on Friday 20th June 2008.

⁴ Susan Suleiman. *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde*, Harvard University Press, 1983.

⁵ Suleiman, 1983.

⁶ In *The newly born woman* by Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, I.B Tauris, London 1996, p. 89.

⁷ Jacques Lacan. 'The Significance of the Phallus' in *Écrits: a selection*, translated by Bruce Fink. W.W. Norton, 2002 (originally published in 1958).

⁸ Cixous and Clément, pp 89-90.

⁹ See e.g. Bill Brewster's and Frank Broughton's *How to DJ Right: The Art and Science of Playing Records*, Grove Press, New York, 2003.

¹⁰ For example Albanian folk Iso-polyphony.

analogies, as well as actual sound are used by visual artists; for example, in Mary Kelly's use of remix in her current work, and Kelly Barry's use of forms of Los Angeles hip hop dance moves in his kinesthetic photo-media works.¹¹

In popular music when a 'break' occurs, a new perspective, riff, rhythm or beat comes in. In DJ parlance a break is where all a song's elements except percussion disappear for a time; in hip hop and rap, 'break beat' is a sampling of breaks as drum loops or beats and using these as the basis of a song;¹² i.e. a break is a form of fugal recursion. The philosopher Alain Badiou who writes on contemporary art has used the concept of a 'break'¹³ in relation to his concept of 'the event',¹⁴ a momentous occasion of change which can be political, social or artistic; he talks about keeping 'fidelity to the event',¹⁵ which may include, in my interpretation, a 'break' one has made from a previous identity (for instance the event of childbirth). I will apply this concept of 'the break' and 'keeping fidelity to an event' to Kelly's 'remixes' in which she reviews and repositions her own work reflecting on its significance in a time-based context, demonstrating a process-based approach to contemporary art making as a life-long project of 'breaks and beats' that may cross forms and modes of media.



Figure 2: Mary Kelly and Kelly Barry photographed by Ruth Skilbeck with Kelly's *Antepartum*, 1973. Video loop transferred from Super 8 film, black-and-white, silent, 1:30mins projected dimensions 170 x 220cm

¹¹ Email correspondence between the author and Kelly Barry.

¹² See e.g. Marcyliena Morgan's *The Real Hip-hop: Battling for Knowledge, Power and Respect in the LA Underground*. Duke University Press 2009; Joseph G. Schloss's *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip Hop*. Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 2004.

¹³ See Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*, translated by O. Feltham, published by Continuum, New York, 2005.

¹⁴ See Badiou 2005.

¹⁵ Badiou 2005.

The Fugue of Art Theory

The approach that I term fugal critical analysis is part of an ongoing project to develop an approach to art making and its interpretation that is reflexive, polyphonic and dialogic, that acknowledges the construction of the meaning of art texts as multi-modal compositions and that includes: the artists' desire and social agency, the formal qualities of the work, and the critical and institutional contexts in which art and its meaning are produced.

Fugal modality is an innovative form of multimodality, a new critical research field that re-positions the construction of meaning as an assemblage of sensory, perceptual, and conceptual elements.¹⁶ What differentiates fugal modality from other uses of multimodality (e.g. more purely technical uses) is its transposition from a creatively descriptive mode to a heuristic with a polyphonic focus on linguistic/conceptual/and contextual discursive elements, textual analysis and the social agency of the artist or author in the interpretations of the artist, critic, and viewer.

Fugue analogies, in various interpretations, have played a significant, if subliminal, role in the development of methodologies of *contrapuntal* cultural interpretation including Edward Said's *contrapuntal reading*, Mikhail Bakhtin's *polyphony* and *dialogism*, Homi Bhabha's *cultural hybridity*, influencing the writings of *écriture féminine* and feminist post-Freudian cultural theory in the work of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray,¹⁷ all of which provide a significant context for analysis of innovative cross-cultural and hybrid forms of creative arts in contemporary transnational culture, and a context for thinking about new global or transnational aesthetics of cultural hybridity.

The fugue is a cultural figure with seemingly paradoxical meanings. As a musical form, the fugue interweaves many voices in infinite inventive variations on a theme, with origins in the singing voice of antiquity, and the circular 'round.' Drawing on the fugue's second

¹⁶ Kress, G.R. and Van Leeuwen, T.(2002) *Multimodal Discourse: the modes and media of contemporary communication*, London, Edward Arnold.

¹⁷ See, for example: Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. New York, Vintage, 1993.

Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Michael Holquist (ed). Trans.

Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin and London, University of Texas Press. 1981; 165/93.

Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. Oxon: Routledge. 1994.

Kristeva Julia. *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*. Tran. Leon S. Roudiez. New York. Columbia UP. 1974; 1982.

Hélène Cixous. 'Writing and the Law: Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka and Lispector', in *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Lispector, Tsvetaeva*. Trans. Verena Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1991.

Hélène Cixous, Annie Leclerc, Madeleine Gagnon. *La Venue a L'écriture*. Paris: Union générale. 1977. d'editions.

Hélène Cixous. 'Coming to Writing and Other Essays'. Deborah Jenson, Trans. and ed. Cambridge, Mass/London: Harvard University Press. 1991.

Hélène Cixous. *First Days of the Year*. Trans. with a preface by Catherine MacGillivray. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1998.

Hélène Cixous. 'Le Rire de la Méduse', in Maïté Albisture and Daniel Armogathe, eds. *La Greif des femmes, Vol. 2. Anthologie de texts féministe du second empire à nos jours*. Paris: Éditions Hier & Demain. 1975/1978. pp 307-313.

Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement. [La jeune née] *The Newly Born Woman (Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 2)*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota. 1975/1986.

Hélène Cixous's 'Le roman aujourd'hui' entretien avec Henri-Quéré.' *Fabula*. No. 3 (March). 1984. pp 147-158.

Hélène Cixous's 'Utopias' in *New French Feminisms*. Marks de Coutrivon, ed. New York: Harvest Wheatsheaf. 1981. Hélène Cixous. *IIIa*. Paris: Éditions des Femmes. 1980.

Luce Irigaray's *Ce sexe qui n'en pas un*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit. 1977.

Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. C. Burke and G. Gill. Ithaca. 1993.

'psychogenic' meaning, as a wandering journey of temporary self-loss, also has resonance in this analogy. As a way of referring to processes of art and writing that operate on an unconscious level: driven by deep psychic movements of dream, trauma and desire. Exploring the unconscious function of writing as a form of Kleinian restitution of a lost object¹⁸ that paradoxically entails a form of dissociative self-loss in which the 'subject' writes to reconstitute the Self, is a rich field for inquiry. Contemporary trauma theories¹⁹ suggest a link between trauma and creative innovation as a form of self survival. Cultural trauma has been linked to the formation of collective or group identity through subliminal strategies of empathetic inclusion or social exclusion.²⁰ Drawing these themes together, the 1970s women's art movement and feminism may be viewed as a cultural reaction and response to patriarchal objectification, and exclusion of women as active signifying agents (artists) throughout the history of western art.²¹ As women took collective political action in a concerted public campaign to gain the right to vote in the early 20th century; so too, in the 1970s, did women take collective action to seize the right to express themselves in the public sphere, as artist-subjects rather than passive-objects of the desiring gaze. In the process, rethinking art as a site and a modality through which psychological and cultural trauma may be transformed.

The Art of Fugue Theory

The concept of fugal analysis alludes to fugue as a democratic musical form and music as a form of social communication. This concept relates to art as the site, scene and performance of an event in the open democracy of the public sphere. If it were to solidify into a methodology of rules that was used authoritatively or for rote learning (like the 'school fugue')²² this would defeat the purpose of the fugal approach. For, as the philosopher Alain Badiou insists, in *Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art*: 'It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent.'²³ Warning against reproducing cultural power structures has meaning for art and its interpretation, that was understood by feminist artists, writers and theorists of the 1970s who practiced new ways of women's writing, that sought to enable women to speak, not as ventriloquist's dummies of 'the law of the father' but as speaking subjects, feminine selves, women writers and artists. The concept of *écriture* /writing as transformative process extends to all forms of performative, self-based art practice.

In contrast to pre-existent forms recognized by 'Empire' are the non-existent forms, coming-into-being forms; forms that are malleable and mutating, morphing, in a process of

¹⁸ Melanie Klein's *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921- 1945* by Melanie Klein. London: The Hogarth Press, 1930/75.

¹⁹ In: Cathy Caruth (ed.) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press. 1995; Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press. 1996; J. Alexander; R. Eyerman; B.Giesen; N.Smelse; P. Sztompka's *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. California: University of California Press. 2004.

²⁰ Jeffrey Alexander, 2004.

²¹ For example, Linda Nochlin's 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' republished in Nochlin's *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994.

²² Used for music teaching exercises although in *The Study of Fugue* (Rutgers, USA. 1978) Alfred Mann argues that after learning by rote the form may be reinvented creatively.

²³ Alain Badiou outlined *Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art* at the Drawing Centre, New York in 2003, reprinted in *Lacanian Ink* 22, Fall Issue on *Limite*

becoming. These are the becoming-forms in the interstices of unconsciousness, the primal rhythms of Kristeva's pre-semiotic *chora*.²⁴ Coming into consciousness, the whispers and urges to create; the reflexive fugal modality is a modality of becoming. It is a mode of the future anterior: a dual process of forgetting and remembering; forgetting who you are, in the moment of the break, so that you can remember the creation of the work that you will produce in that moment.

Fugue serves not just as a multi-modal analogy, but also suggests a number of critical style terms, transposed from music, that I have developed elsewhere,²⁵ and that I apply here.

The Fugal Modality of Writing: In 'the fugal modality of writing' two theories of modality are brought together. The first derives from the philosophical concept of modality and modal logic and is related to the concept of *de re* thought as articulated in linguistic propositions. The second is derived from modal music and is related to the development of canon in writing language as creative art. How it works can be conceptualised imaginatively. The fugal modality of writing is activated in the fluid, musical, almost dream-like relationship an artist may have in the conceptual experience of language, in any encounter with words. It entails a mode of affirmation and necessity in mind and body as the writer turns perceptions and physical bodily actions to writing. It is the modality of creative psycho-linguistic re-invention in any medium of language, and (potentially) infinite variation on a theme.

The Synaesthetic/ Intermedial Textual Fugue: The textual fugue embodies and articulates experience a-semantically, kinetically, articulated and inscribed into language form that can be musical or literary or visual; symbolic and/or indexical. The textual fugue constitutes multi-sensory inputs that render it synaesthetic, and inter-medial.

Polyphony: The musical art of polyphony, many voices, translates into polyphonic visual art writing.

Themes and Voices: A fugue has several voices, each of which enunciates, plays and develops the melodic subject line.

Variation (on a Theme): Variation can occur in numerous ways including diminution, reversal, repetition, inversion, elaboration, embellishment, mirroring.

Developments: Voices playing on the theme create complex variations within their counterpoint, in relation to each other.

Recurring Motifs: May be a line, a colour, a shape, an image, a sound; the artist's marks.

Counterpoint: Interwoven voices, creating a multi-linear, complex text of voices.

Double Counterpoint and Double-Voiced Discourse: A form of counterpoint for two voices in which the dominant switches place with the subordinate, and vice versa.

Memory in Textual Composition: Involuntary memory and loss of awareness of self identity constitute an a-semantic link in the creative processes of composition in the 'inspirational' mode of compulsion to make art. Paradoxically this process of invention from memory also involves forgetting, a form of fugal recursion.

Fugal recursion: reflexively putting on hold parts of the composition whilst working on other parts.

²⁴ Kristeva, 1986.

²⁵ Ruth Skilbeck, *The Writer's Fugue: Musicalization, Trauma and Subjectivity in the Literature of Modernity*. Unpublished PhD thesis, 2007.

Mary Kelly and Kelly Barry: A Secret Agreement

Political and conceptual themes are interwoven in Mary Kelly's work. She has said²⁶ that as a student at St Martins School of Art²⁷ in London from 1968-70 her work had two main divergent influences: the post-Caro-inspired conceptual group at St Martins, and a focus on social issues, at the Berwick Street Film Collective, where she made two films on women workers, *Nightcleaners* 1975 and *Women and Work* 1973-75. Whilst documenting the subjectivity of women factory workers, through interviews, Kelly then turned the focus of her inquiry into subjectivity to her own pregnancy in *Antepartum*. She has said that her aim in *Post-Partum Document* was to articulate 'the intricacies of maternal desire';²⁸ the work specifically responds to Lacan's psychoanalytic theories of desire and lack, and discursive subject formation articulated through language.²⁹

Maternal Metaphor

For six years Kelly ritualistically documented in a series of text-based works and collage, the relationship between herself and her young son. The resulting large-scale installation comprising graphs, drawings, recordings, scribbles, handprints and even dirty diaper-liners parodically framed in plexi-glass museum cases records the boy's development from infancy through to the age of five. The fetishistic series is also a record of the mother's thoughts and feelings, with each new record functioning like an act of text-based semiotic liberation. An extraordinary monumental work, *Post-Partum Document* inscribes a process of becoming: of Kelly becoming-mother becoming-artist, and of her baby becoming child. Examining how *Post-Partum Document* was considered by feminists, and critics and theorists, to be highly controversial reveals the work's inter-disciplinary innovation and self-based invention.

The style and format of *Post-Partum Document* is, in part, humorously reminiscent of a large-scale personalized version of the kind of 'Baby Book' given out by health centers in the UK, in the 1970s, to record and document babies progress. Certain developmental stages were expected to be reached by certain times and it was the mother's role to document and record them. In *Post-Partum Document*, in a diarized counterpoint to the infant record, Kelly documents the development of maternal subjectivity, in responses to the child's actions. For instance against the record of her child's action:

That's my shovel (answering is that your shovel).³⁰

The mother's response reveals the drama and conflict of the everyday life of a mother of a young child:

I'm trying to distract him from the fire by talking to him about the fire shovel. Should I spank him?³¹

²⁶ In interview with Douglas Crimp. *Mary Kelly*, 1997, p. 11.

²⁷ Now known as Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design.

²⁸ Mary Kelly in interview with Klaus Ottman. *Journal of Contemporary Art*, New York, 1992, Fall.

²⁹ See e.g. *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, W.W. Norton and Co, 1977,

³⁰ From: *Post-Partum Document: Documentation III, Analysed Markings and Diary-perspective Schema*.

³¹ From *Post-Partum Document* as above, reproduced on p.4 of *Mary Kelly*, 1997.

The work is made of a number of sections. At the end of each section is a modified diagram of Lacan's diagram of the subject: S over little s, divided by the bar signifying repression, interpreted as the subject of a (phallic) signifier of lack; a figurative way that Kelly used to represent maternal anxiety. The articulation of anxious questions followed. Yet, she has said of this deconstructive strategy that the self-conscious articulation of doubt and anxiety signifies the gap of reflection from which it is possible to change. It represents a break, the space of art, and self reflexive identity formation; Kelly has said of this: 'it is precisely at such moments that it is possible to desire to speak and to dare to change.'³² By not using pictorial images, or figurative representation, the conceptual work fulfils the conceptual anti-subject aesthetic, focusing on linguistic structure, and discourse. It also avoids a key problem in feminist aesthetics of self-objectification through self-representation.

In our interview at the MCA,³³ Kelly remembered her bemusement at the reaction caused by *Post-Partum Document* when its first sections were exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1976.

She said: "I thought once the question of interrogating the object and even the interrogation itself had been posed, it would just be completely logical to bring up the issue of subjectivity." She recalled that although her desire to explore subjectivity: "had been informed by feminist debate in a much wider context, I brought it into my own procedures in terms of the work itself and embarked on this project-based art-as-life thing. I didn't know when it was going to end but when I started out I thought it would be clear that it had come out of conceptualism, but it just ended up making everybody uneasy [*laughs*]. The critics and theorists said – well, they liked the theory but why did it have to have that "stuff" like the, you know, so-called dirty nappies [*laughs*] and the feminists said – oh well, we like the narratives and the 'stuff', but why do you have to have the theory? So, on every front it seemed to be confrontational at the time."

Kelly referred to her work in the wider context of social change: "Although perhaps I can't completely take credit for consciously causing a scandal at the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art in London) in 1976, when I look back on it, the way that that moment in history came together with my practice as an artist, I would say something of a breakthrough took place then in terms of gender and the way that art could no longer be viewed as perfectly neutral."³⁴

Symbolic Significance of Closure

At what point did Kelly decide her diachronic sequential installation was complete? "When [my son] wrote his name, I saw it as the end of the work because it was like he's the author of his own text now and I'd better not go further than that."³⁵ This acknowledges Lacan's view of the child's separation from the mother at the point of entering the Symbolic order through language acquisition. According to Lacan, before this the child inhabits the realm of the Imaginary, perceiving no sense of separation from the world, no sense of absence only presence. For Lacan, entry to the symbolic order of language also signifies an acceptance

³² *Mary Kelly*. 1997, p. 48

³³ I interviewed Mary Kelly and Kelly Barrie at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art on Friday 20th June 2008.

³⁴ Mary Kelly in interview with Ruth Skilbeck, Museum of Contemporary Art, as above.

³⁵ Mary Kelly in interview with Ruth Skilbeck.

of the Law of the Father. Women on the other hand are viewed as constituting a 'lack' symbolically articulated in cultural terms (they have to speak, and use, 'masculine' language).

Feminist psychoanalytic theorists and artists reinterpreted 'the phallus' as anything which gives a sense of agency, autonomy and symbolic power in the symbolic realm of culture, such as art making. Kelly's depiction of motherhood as a discursive site of subjectivity was a breakthrough for the cultural repositioning of women as active subjects rather than objects of the desiring gaze. In its exploration of the subjective position of reflexive art practice, the discourses that shape the identity formation of a mother, *Post-Partum Document* shows how the social subject is shaped by discursive practices, yet is also capable of reshaping and restructuring those practices through the autonomous agency of art. Specifically, in Mary Kelly's work she used multiple media and modes to create the most extended exploration of the articulation of the maternal subject and subjectivity in the language of visual art.

2008 Sydney Biennale

"I never had any intention of doing anything with [Kelly] again." She laughed. "I was going to keep my distance! But [the collaborative work for the Biennale] was an interesting way to reconsider certain things; a personal as well as political history."³⁶

For their collaborative work for the Sydney Biennale, Mary Kelly and Kelly Barrie made a luminous and profound video installation combining two works. On one wall Mary Kelly's *Antepartum* was projected on a continuous loop. The grainy black-and-white Super 8 footage transferred to video showed the belly of a pregnant woman (the artist herself, pregnant with her son Kelly), full as a moon and caressed by maternal hands. Opposite this was Kelly Barrie's video projection *Astralfields and Other Manifestations* showing a field of pink and dark coloured lights resembling scattering galactic implosions of energy (created by bursting bags of flour and spittle) in an expanding spatial universe. Rather than existing as entirely separate works, the small movements of the unborn child and mother's hands in *Antepartum* were coordinated with the light-rays pulsing from *Astralfields*.

Through its inter-play of lights, the work overturns and reverses gendered psychoanalytic symbolism of 'interiority,' 'introversion' and 'extroversion' in the literal and symbolic interactions of the two works. I asked the artists about the development, and interweaving, of their conceptual ideas in making the work.

Kelly said: "We were talking about the way Julia Kristeva describes the child's earliest relationship with the mother as introjection and projection, something prior to full

³⁶ Mary Kelly in interview with Ruth Skilbeck.



Figure 2: Mary Kelly and Kelly Barrie photographed by Ruth Skilbeck with Barrie's, *Astralfields and Other Manifestations* 2008. Video, endless loop, black-and-white, silent, 1:30 mins

identification. Well, Kelly and I were joking about spitting out the mother, in a sense, and then as we thought more about those psychic processes it seemed like spitting was an obvious projection, which in [Kelly's] image expands to suggest an infinite universe and then, in mine, there's introjection of the child in terms of the symbiotic relation to the mother's body and in the imaginary space of maternal identity."

She added: "When we thought about it again things reversed right? And how did it go? We were saying that there's projection on the side of my piece and then introjection on the side of yours..."³⁷

The installation reinstates Kelly Barrie, the object of *Antepartum* and *Post-Partum Document*, as an active equal participating subject within and adding to his mother's art-work. Rethinking the relation of mother and child and the valorization of the separation from the mother is a significant effect of this collaborative piece.

Reflecting on the work, Mary Kelly said: "in one sense there's a return to the past as one meaning of revolution in this exhibition, which is quite obviously historical. The other is psychological and more obscure." She said that Biennale curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev "told me she was always looking for her mother and she didn't think this idea of distance from the mother should be valorised."

Significantly, in terms of her own work, she added: "I thought this touched on what was really at stake in my work and why it goes beyond the exhibition to invoke an almost existential sense of return to the past, I mean, everyone's wish to return to that impossible place – the unmediated relation to the mother."³⁸

Kelly and Barrie's collaborative work operates on many levels of meaning. Most significantly is its exploration, response to, and critique of psychoanalytic themes of the relationship between mother and child; from a feminine perspective it rethinks and overturns the antagonisms of the Freudian oedipal complex and the need to violently repudiate the mother. The violent primal model is replaced with a collaborative creative exchange as adults and equal participants in a dialogue of art and life.

This is a powerful legacy of feminism: liberation from gendered and familial power-based stereotypes. The opening of an art-space for critical reflective practice on gendered social roles, including reflection on 'pre-semiotic' relations: the rhythms of heart 'beats and breaks' that literally make us human.

Fugal Critical Analysis

A fugal critical analysis of the counterpoint, polyphony and dialogism of Kelly and Barrie's collaborative work operates on multiple levels.

Fugal modality: In the project of life-as-art subjectivity the artist, figuratively speaking, makes an artistic and political break. In this moment the old identity roles (of social prescriptions) are forgotten. This may be likened to a fugal journey of defamiliarization, in the process of change to 'becoming-mother becoming-artist'. The *Post-Partum Document* bears witness to this and keeps fidelity to the event of artistic and political break. Kelly has continued to keep fidelity to the event, of the break of feminism, and the break of her transformation, in her current work.

Double counterpoint: Kelly's work is playful and 'subversive' in that it offers a perspective from a subliminal position of the inner world of feminine subjectivity. In the social context of the women's art movement and feminism, her articulation of subjectivity provides and articulates an aesthetic and cultural/political counterpoint to the objectified representations of women throughout the history of western art.

³⁷ Mary Kelly in interview with Ruth Skilbeck.

³⁸ Mary Kelly in interview with Ruth Skilbeck.

Fugal recursion: In the process of art-writing, Kelly's work is fugally recursive, reflexively putting on hold and returning to parts of her life-art composition, in a mode of future anterior that narrates the history of feminism and herself as an artist in the visual language of her art that literally, metaphorically, and symbolically documents a process of becoming.

Technical multi-modality: Feminist artists were always at the forefront of using new technologies, experimenting with multiple and mixed modes of media, to make their art. In her use of Super 8 films, performance and installation and video, Kelly's work exemplifies this innovation.

Polyphony: The polyphony of the text includes the voices of the past, of Kelly and her unborn child, which interact and are interwoven through the voices of the present work. The meaning of the work is positioned contrapuntally within a social context of cultural feminism and institutional critique; in the setting of the 2008 Biennale.

Images: The photographic images of the artists standing within their installation (Figures 1 and 2) add another 'voice' to the interpretation.

Dialogism: In interview, dialogically and in their spoken voices, the artists each reflected on the making of the work. This becomes threaded into the critical analysis adding to its meaning from the aspect of the artists' own words, speaking of the creative processes and ideas in their work, and its social context.

The Author's Voice: Yet the composition, the writing, of the essay of fugal critical analysis is an event created by the author, who may also assume the identity positions of artist, composer, or 'subject'; albeit the *meaning* of the text may be open to the interpretation of the reader. Fugal writing is original to the extent that each piece of writing constitutes an unfolding of fugal recursion, performing an event, and/or keeping fidelity to an event, in a process of becoming.

Coda

There are many significant ways that feminism continues to influence transnational art: culturally, socially, aesthetically and politically. Pioneering work in subjectivity and sexual politics by the 1970s women's art movement is of renewed relevance for women/artists in emerging global economies such as India, China, Indonesia and South America. Dynamic new work by younger generations of women artists is emerging from these regions,³⁹ women's art activism and projects are continuing around the world.⁴⁰ Whilst not suggesting that the struggle for equality is over, in this paper I have considered some ongoing impacts of feminist art. In challenging women's historical exclusion as cultural practitioners, and unitary modes of representation, feminist artists set into play a multi-modal, socially aware international art movement that overtly and subliminally remixes women's diverse voices, views and visions in transnational contemporary culture.

"This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body."

³⁹ For instance in the work of artists such as Mithu Sen in India and Tiarna Dame Ruth Sarait in Indonesia.

⁴⁰ See grants awarded to support women's art projects, documented on the *Feminist Review* website.