

Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*

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Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* was first shown in 1976 in London at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The project spanned six years: the first six years of her son Kelly Barrie's life. The piece includes 6 parts and 163 individual elements such as diagrams, diaries, scribbles, diaper liners, dialogue transcriptions, growth charts, specimens, footnotes, anatomical drawings, and plaster casts. This work traces the mother's loss of the child in the context of Lacan's theory of symbolic order, a theory to which she specifically refers. As the child matures he enters into the realm of language, a structure that depends on absence but is also primarily a patriarchal system. The child learns to understand representation during a period that Lacan calls the mirror stage. From the age of 6 to 18 months, he begins to recognize his own image in a mirror, indicating a mapping of his subjectivity onto his own image.¹ This piece documents various aspects of the child's growth, focusing on the often-taboo subject of maternal desire. *Post-Partum Document* has many facets and can be considered in the context of institutional critique because of the ways that it questions authorship, institutional determination, and categories of meaning.

Mary Kelly's critique of authorship is a critique of the institution of art and the way the institution depends on a conservative notion of authorship and value. The institution of art is invested in uniqueness and authenticity in order to generate and maintain a system of value. By producing a counter-model of authorship, which is a joint portrait of herself and her child, a joint portrait of growth and loss and interdependency, she proposes an alternative to the single-mindedness and systemic exclusion of the patronymic system of authorship.

The way that Kelly tries to thwart institutional determination of the interpretation of this piece is another form of institutional critique. Art criticism, increasingly part of the institution of art, is a realm from which artists are often alienated. By including her own academic writing in the presentation of the piece, she refuses to cede power to an external group of critics. And yet, although she includes written material in *Post-Partum Document*, meaning is impossible to pin down. Kelly is ultimately interrogating categories of meaning and the conditions that produce meaning. She breaks down the separation between private and public. The way that she displays *Post-Partum Document*, the content of which is both rarified academic theory and extremely personal material, is a way of using the museological apparatus and interpolating the gallery space with unexpected and disruptive material. The concept of coauthorship is crucial in this

¹ Jacques Lacan. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience: Delivered on July 17, 1949, in Zurich at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis" in *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, Norton, 1977).

piece. At that point in time, the author could no longer effectively claim to be the unique source of meaning for his work.² The analytical feminist standpoint aligned itself with a deconstructivist idea of identity; part of Kelly's project was to reveal motherhood and identity itself as constructed and coproduced through relationships. Kelly elucidates in the preface to the catalogue that she wanted "to question the notion of femininity as a pre-given entity and foreground instead its social construction."³ The physical mark-making is carried out both by her and her son, and the final section of *Post-Partum Document* consists of 15 slate tablets upon which Kelly Barrie has inscribed letters as he learns to write. This stage of his entry into language is complete when he can write his full name, which he does on the very last tablet. The work ends with his signature, an indication of his role in the creation of this piece.

In the context of *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly's critique of authorship is a critique of a system that insists on absolute truths. It is a critique of a patriarchal system that does not acknowledge the traumatic experience of the mother with regard to the growth of the child. Craig Owens refers to the feminist gesture of refusing auteurism in his essay "From Work to Frame." Understanding Roland Barthes' conception of the author's relation to his work as one of father to son, Owens extrapolates that a refusal of that relation is hardly a melancholic one from a feminist point of view.⁴ Asserting her subjectivity in conjunction with her son's is a feminist project as well as an institution-critical one. In a way, this attempt to offer a new collaborative model of authorship has been neutralized by its institutionalization—today we remember this work as Kelly's famous gesture. Yet its radicality is still apparent in that this struggle remains relevant to artists today, as well as its effect on contemporaneous artists and critics.

Kelly writes about the increasing institutionalization of modernist discourse.⁵ The elite audience from which and for which criticism exists promulgates certain assumptions that construct the art object as such. Art criticism serves the conservative function of instantiating authorship. She has written, "the normalization of a mode of representation always entails the marginalization of an alternative set of practices and discourses."⁶ The political consequences of modernist institutionalization are a subsequent evacuation of narrative, conceptual, and social purpose art. Kelly extrapolates the institution into a textual field. Beyond offering a model of coauthorship as a way of thwarting expectations, eluding institutional control becomes possible to some extent through her own reading of the work and her writing. *Post-Partum Document* refuses to function as a traditional work of art. It presents an understanding of itself that is self-determined by the artist.

² Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author." *Image / Music / Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). 142-7.

³ Mary Kelly. "Preface" in *Post-Partum Document*, (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1999).

⁴ Craig Owens, "From Work to Frame," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1992). 125.

⁵ Mary Kelly "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism" in *Imaging Desire*, (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996). 80-83.

⁶ Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism" 81.

Evading institutional control was a preoccupation of many artists at this time. Robert Smithson for example was staunchly against the institution of the museum, and considered it to be a place of violence and captivity akin to a prison or an asylum. He asserted that works of art in a gallery enter a state of “esthetic convalescence” when handled by “the warden-curator.”⁷ His strategy was to create pieces in space outside the gallery, often in post-industrial landscapes. Kelly’s strategy takes the different and perhaps more successful tactic of offering her own analysis as part of the work. Yet there is no way to summarize the implications of this piece because it is so expansive. Kelly’s crossover into the work of academic writing about art allows her to regain territory lost to a field of critics that emerged with the institutionalization and expansion of the art world. Her inscription of herself into the piece through her use of complex psychoanalytic theory and structuralism stymies the mechanisms of the art institution to interpret a work out of the specific context of its creation.

Kelly also participates in a fundamentally institution-critical gesture of questioning the production of meaning. She questions the categorical delimitation of content into the separate spheres of private and public. Art institutions rely on classification systems: is *Post-Partum Document* a sociological work, a scientific study, a feminist art piece, a semiotic investigation, a personal scrapbook? Of course it is all of the above. As she demonstrates the formation of her identity in relation to this child, she demonstrates the anti-essentialist structuralist concept of motherhood as determined discursively. The identity category of mother is as discursive as the identity category of art.

The mode of presentation of *Post-Partum Document* is important to its critical function. Rows of pristine frames signify “art” to gallery-goers. To find a stained diaper inside a clear glass plate produced a shock that led to the headline: “On Show at ICA... dirty nappies!”⁸ The use of traditional display was important to the work’s meaning as both Kelly and Lucy Lippard agree. Lippard introduced the catalogue of the exhibition with a forward, in which she described one of Kelly’s aims with this work as creating a “parody of art commodification by the pristine and institutional presentation.”⁹ Kelly herself states “the work subscribes to certain modes of presentation; the framing, for example, parodies a familiar type of museum display in so far as it allows my archaeology of everyday life to slip unannounced into the great hall and ask impertinent questions of its keepers.”¹⁰ Both refer to *Post-Partum Document* as parodying the seriousness of the hallowed space of exhibition by forcing attention to a certain absurdity of the frame. Kelly is able to demonstrate the power of the frame as a signifier of art as a category by

⁷ Robert Smithson “Cultural Confinement” in Christian Kravagna and Kunsthaus Bregenz, eds., *The Museum as Arena: Artists on Institutional Critique*. 17.

⁸ Roger Bray. “On Show at ICA ... dirty nappies!”, *Evening Standard*, (14 October 1976).

⁹ Lucy Lippard, “Forward,” *Post-Partum Document*, by Mary Kelly (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1999). ix.

¹⁰ Kelly. “Preface,” *Post-Partum Document*, by Mary Kelly (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1999). xx.

placing unexpected content within the frame: both highly personal objects and esoteric forms of knowledge.

The juxtaposition of academic writing and scientific analysis with baby's scribbles and stains seeks to introduce new ways of thought and to break apart arbitrary divisions between types of knowledge. In this piece text and image are essentially linked. Kelly emphasized the importance of the footnotes and bibliography. This interjection of supposedly non-artistic content, more endemic to an academic study than a work of art, "affronted the aesthetic sensibilities of some even more than the fecal stains."¹¹ To many viewers, this type of content could not be considered art.

The project of exploring what makes an art object was taken up by conceptual artists like Mel Bochner, who, like Kelly, emphasized the conditions of the production of meaning. Benjamin Buchloh wrote about Bochner's insertion of materials not traditionally recognized as art into an overtly artistic context, which Buchloh dubs the first truly conceptual exhibition: the show at the School of Visual Arts Gallery in December of 1966, *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to be Viewed as Art*.¹² In it were assembled sketches, documents, and other paraphernalia, xeroxed and placed in four binders that were placed on pedestals. Pedestals function here as signifiers of museological importance, while the documents serve to challenge that signification of reverence. *Post-Partum Document* operates under a similar rhetoric: "non-art" materials are presented to the viewer in a context that indicates their art-ness.

Hans Haacke was also interested in the arbitrary conditions that create works of art as such. He recognized that art objects don't "elevate themselves from the host of man-made objects simply on the basis of some inherent qualities," in fact they "have been singled out as culturally significant objects by those who at any given time and social stratum wield the power to confer the predicate 'work of art' unto them."¹³ The markers of that singling out are the pedestals and frames, the white cube of the gallery that clears out other content and signals that viewers should relate to the objects in a different way than they would in another context. Many mothers keep locks of hair, baby clothes, and first attempts at writing, but it is often belittled as silly fetishism and sentimentality. The interjection of this material into the gallery for the exhibition of *Post-Partum Document* was an interrogation of this process of becoming an artwork. Daniel Buren wrote about the function of the museum and the "frame necessary to the works set in it (necessary to their very existence)."¹⁴ The frame is sometimes the only thing necessary to create the work. This constructedness of meaning, which Marcel Duchamp first demonstrated with his

¹¹ Mary Kelly. "Introduction" in *Imaging Desire*, (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1996). xx

¹² Benjamin Buchloh. "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55, (Winter, 1990) 109.

¹³ Hans Haacke. Statement from *Art into Society; Society into Art*, (Institute of Contemporary Arts. London, 1974). 63.

¹⁴ Daniel Buren. "Function of the Museum" in *Five Texts*, (New York, John Weber Gallery, 1973). 61.

readymades, is described in the late twentieth century by institution-critical artists as explicitly social and formed through structural relations.

The nature of the collection and proliferation of objects in *Post-Partum Document* is similar to Marcel Broodthaer's "Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles" collection in its seeming banality. Both works push the boundaries of the category of art by using the traditional methods of display and interpolating unexpected material. For Kelly, objects of an extremely personal nature break up the clinical illusion of universality in the gallery space. Though the piece is mounted in a traditional manner with a straight line of impeccable frames, the presence of "dirty nappies" shocked the public, leading critics to denounce her as both too sentimental and too vulgar to be called art. The neatly framed diapers, diary entries, and other artifacts of Kelly Barrie's growth force the division of private and public out into the open. Just as Broodthaer's project interrogated the categories and classifications of cultural objects, Kelly's piece introduced personal artifacts in conjunction with traditional rarified modes of display in order to question their separation.

Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* produces a joint portrait of herself and her child in a relationship of mutual self-definition. By denying the fantasy of inherent meaning, she is mounting a critique of the institution that supports conservative notions of authorship. Kelly's interest in discursive contexts necessitates a work of expansive proportions, the implications of which are impossible to confine. By including within the work its own analysis, she attempts to limit the role of the institution in defining her piece. This work is institution-critical through a series of unexpected interjections, of personal artifacts of her child into scientific and academic content, and of these diapers and footnotes into the gallery space. By making use of the museological framework to present her work, and through an investigation of her subjectivity in relation to her son's, she sets up a contrast that points out the truly social configurations of meaning.

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