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NARRATING MOTHERHOOD AS EXPERIENCE AND INSTITUTION: EXPERIMENTAL LIFE-WRITING IN MARY KELLY'S *POST-PARTUM DOCUMENT* (1973–79)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores American visual artist Mary Kelly's autobiographical work *Post-partum document* in reference to the politics of life writing. Resorting to Lacanian psychoanalysis, a pastiche of scientific narratives and other (auto-)narrative strategies, in her work Kelly documented the first five years of her son's life from his weaning from the breast until the day when he wrote his name. By documenting her child's development, the artist also recorded the process of her own formation as a maternal subject, a formation gradually worked out through an evolving relationship with her son. In her work, the artist made vivid the incompatibility and limitations of various narrative frameworks in retelling a fundamentally relational experience that verges on the mental and bodily, and which is necessarily mediated by the patriarchal ideology. This article analyses Kelly's conflicting narrative strategies that fail to successfully represent the mother-child formative relationship and which demonstrate the mother's ideological alienation. It reads Kelly's work politically, exploring the ways in which *Post-partum document*'s (auto-)narrative voices address questions and dilemmas of the feminine/maternal subject, the subject's formation, and the limits of its (self-) representation within patriarchy. The article argues that Kelly challenges the traditional autobiographic genre by attending to her lived experience as a mother and the culturally repressed maternal desire.

Keywords: Mary Kelly, *Post-partum document*, feminism, feminist art, the maternal, autobiography, life writing, representation, relationship

Mary Kelly's *Post-partum document*, which is "a mixed media installation" (McCloskey 2012: 1), is a classic of second-wave feminist art and, at the same time, a heavily autobiographical piece.[1] In her work, for over five years (1973-

[1] For detailed information, including high-quality captioned photos of particular units and the

79), American visual artist Mary Kelly documented the process of the self-formation of her son: from his weaning from the breast until the day when he wrote his name. Generating a great deal of academic interest, *Post-partum document* came as part of a greater attempt to challenge the traditional notion of autobiographical writing,[2] reflecting the debates within critical theory of the 1970s, most notably feminism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and poststructuralism.[3] Maternity researcher Paula McCloskey states that, as a "discursive site, *Post-partum document* draws on sociology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and feminism" (2012: 3), while already in the 1970s, Laura Mulvey defined Kelly's work as "an attempt to turn the most unspoken and culturally repressed of everyday experiences (mother-child relationship) into an art work inspired by feminism and psychoanalysis" (1976: 202). The artist herself stated that *Post-partum document* records "an on-going process of analysis and visualization of mother-child relationship" (1982: xv), and, according to Ruth Skilbeck, in *Post-partum document,* Mary Kelly "brought together two forms of artmaking that were conventionally seen as separate, even antithetical: conceptual art and self-based narrative" (2011). Significantly, McCloskey observes that it is Kelly's drawing from a genuine life-experience, or making a "subjective investment," that connects the narrative "multiplicities" of her work (2012: 9). Finally, Griselda Pollock offers a pointed reading of *Post-partum document*'s politics:

> [T]he document images discourse, not words but speech and statements, as the site of subjective and ideological activity. [It] reverses the bodily presence and vocal absence which typifies the representation of woman as sign in masculine representation. It produces a voice from the position of the feminine and makes the spectator study the initiation of the child into a language which is the symbolic system of a patriarchal order. (1988: 170)

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whole installation, go to http://www.marykellyartist.com/post_partum_document.html .

2 I follow Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's definition of the classical autobiography as a "master narrative of Western rationality, progress, and superiority" (2001: 113), which "emerged in the Enlightenment and has become canonical in the West" (2001: 3-4) and is epitomized in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Rousseau's *Confessions*, and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. I also follow Smith and Watson's definition of life writing as "writing of diverse kinds that takes life as its subject" (2001: 3).

3 In *Autobiography and Postmodernism,* Leigh Gilmore notes: "A glance at the history of autobiography studies reveals that at the end of the 1970s, just as the challenges to traditional modes of scholarly practice posed by more explicitly political forms of criticism and theory were affecting the academy, the study of autobiography was being remade. Two collections of essays published in 1980 inaugurated a new wave of interest: *Womens' Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, edited by Estelle C. Jelinek, and *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by James Olney, were characterized by the vital conjunction of autobiography and emerging forms of criticism" (1994: 4).

Pollock's quote accurately captures the theoretical framework of my analysis, engaging such terms as subjectivity, ideology and the feminine voice. In the following pages, I want to focus on Mary Kelly's juxtaposing in *Post-partum document* ideological representations of motherhood with her attempt to attend to the mother's lived and embodied experience. My objective is two-fold. First, I want to bring into focus the disciplining and limiting function of ready-made discourses replicated by Kelly in her work, through which multiple mother-subjects are ideologically produced. As each discourse produces the maternal subject from within its domain, they are disjointed and fragmentary. Second, I want to trace the ways in which the artist attends to the culturally repressed dimensions of the early mother-child relation, for which there is no ready-made discourse. As such, Kelly's attempt to address it comes as a "set of ever-shifting self-referential practices," or a "moving target" (Smith and Watson 2001: 3) that is to signal an embodied and strongly cathected experience that to a large extent happens outside of language and manifests itself through symptoms. By retracing this juxtaposition, I aim to demonstrate how Kelly's multi-faceted narrative-visual performance strips bare the shortcomings of the ready-made narrative frameworks and shows how the culturally unprocessed early maternal experience translates into a representational impotence of conventional autobiographical writing.

In order to make my points clear, I need to briefly describe the contents of Kelly's work. Divided into an Introduction[4] followed by six chronological sections, and comprising 135 units in total, *Post-partum document* is a mammoth of an installation. Particular units are displayed framed in perspex boxes, reminiscent of the way specimens are displayed in natural history museums, which gives the installation a "scientific" look. In Part One, on a series of stained diapers, Kelly traces her son's weaning from the breast and introducing him to solid food. On each diaper, the artist has typed precise information concerning his daily food and drink intake that produced the particular stain, reducing the mother's function to that of a precise nourishing machine. Not surprisingly, in 1976, this section sparked much outrage and criticism when it was first shown in the Institute of Contemporary Art in London.[5] At the same time, in Part One the artist already introduces a clash of narratives: stained diapers are typed over with scientific-looking food lists measured in ounces and tablespoons, and divided into solids and liquids (Kelly 1985: 10-37). Part Two of the installation traces her son's weaning from the holophrase, that is his beginning to join single words into phrases. Kelly precisely documents

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4 I am not describing the Introductory section here as I describe it in more detail later.

5 For example, the October 14, 1976 issue of the *Evening Standard* ran an article by Roger Bray titled "On show at ICA… dirty nappies!", with an accompanying illustration captioned: "NAPPY LINE-UP at the ICA Gallery – there are 22 framed exhibits captioned with relative details."

the duration of individual utterances and assigns them meaning: e.g. "utterance: MA-MA; gloss: HELP ME, SEE THIS, BE THERE; function: EXISTENCE" (Kelly 1985: 47; emphasis in the original). Neatly arranged and captioned, the linguistic analyses give off an aura of a methodological scientific investigation. Part Three records Kelly and her son's "weaning from the dyad," that is the son's beginning of nursery school, which is documented by his mother's writings superimposed on his daily scribbles from school. There, Kelly expresses her surprise, delight, ambivalence and sense of being lost at her son's gradual linguistic and mental progress: "I am amazed he can put that difficult puzzle together," "I don't know why he always counts when he pretends to read," "I can't go on reading story. I feel rotten. I wonder how women with more children survive when they're ill" (Kelly 1985: 79-88). All those make-shift observations reveal an urge to make sense of a very fragmented and culturally unprocessed experience, clashed with the notion of motherhood understood as a social institution.

Part Four, which has been called "disarmingly romantic" (Iversen 1981: 208), traces the artist and her son's anxiety of separation, type-written on "transitional objects," "comforting fetishes," or "objects of desire" (Iversen 1981: 208), for example the baby's blanket scraps. What is more, each unit in this section is accompanied by the son's little hand cast in plaster. Here, Kelly records her inner conflict sparked by the day-to-day experience of motherhood: "[My son's] aggressiveness has resurfaced and made me feel anxious about going to work. … Maybe I should stay at home … but we need the money;" and another one: "I didn't see [my son] much this week because of the Brighton show. I've noticed [he] started stuttering. (…) My work has been undermined by [this] (…) I feel I can't carry on with it;" or: "I feel 'ultimately responsible' (…) for providing 'love and attention.' (…) I realized it (…) the first time [my son] said 'I love you, Mummy'" (Kelly 1985: 100-105). Similar to Part Three, those recorded impressions strike a sensitive chord, as the artist expresses her anxiety, confusion and helplessness. Part Five engenders a similar sense of emotional turmoil, inconclusiveness and fragmentation. It contains specimens of animals and plants collected by the boy as gifts for his mother, overwritten with his questions concerning sexuality and accompanied by his mother's answers. The specimens and the conversations constitute a "set of discursive events" (Kelly 1985: 113) where for example a specimen of a collected dandelion flower corresponds to a conversation on breast feeding.

Finally, Part Six documents the son's beginning to read and write, or his acknowledging of the Lacanian "Name of the Father." This part consists of fifteen units and is executed in the form analogous to the ancient Rosetta stone. Found in Egypt in 1799, the Rosetta stone commonly represents an attempt to decode information from a small sample which serves as the clue to understanding a larger whole. The original Rosetta stone contains three scripts: Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs on top, Egyptian demotic script in the middle, and Ancient Greek

in the lower part. Owing to the stone's damaged state, none of the three texts is complete, neither are they identical, which leaves room for ambivalence. As is the case with the Rosetta Stone, each of Kelly's fifteen "stones" contains three texts: the child's "hieroglyphic" letter-shapes in the top section, the mother's handwritten commentary in the mid-section, and her typed diary-narrative at the bottom. The three narratives strongly clash, as even though within each unit they refer to the same experience, they are discursively incompatible. For example, in the top section of the last but one "stone" in Part Six there repeatedly appears the son's name, hand-written by the boy. It is followed by his mother's handwriting, saying:

> (age 4.4) K IS FOR KETTLE. And now he always says "K is for Kelly."[6] He writes his name out so purposefully from left to right, trying hard to stay on the lines and almost always completing it without a mistake and then showing it to me proudly. K IS FOR ALLIGATORS KEEPING KANGAROOS K IS FOR A KIWI AND TWO KOALAS CARRYING A KETTLE GOOD NIGHT LITTLE K KEVIN KASPER KANGAROO. GOOD NIGHT. (Kelly 1985: 183; emphasis in the original)

This experimental narrative is a clear example of the shortcomings of conventional autobiographical writing. Linguistically reflecting the liminal space from which it comes, the narrative profoundly subverts the traditional understanding of the autobiographic subject as an "autonomous individual" who relates a "universalizing life story" (Smith and Watson 2001: 3). In his review of *Post-partum document*, Paul Smith has convincingly noted that "it's almost as if it is not the mother who analyses the child's writing, but the child's writing that analyses the mother, producing within her language a similar resistance to the socially constricted language of the diary" (1982: 211). In this narrative strategy, the subject/object division is not clearly cut, as the documented process is inherently relational. According to the artist, it reflects "the desire to hold on and the need to let go – a process of becoming oneself" (qtd. in Skilbeck 2011), a painful and turbulent process of separation. One can talk of convergence, overlapping, interaction and mutual exchange that runs through this section and which makes it very problematic to tear the subjects apart. Thus critics point to a "dialogic interaction," "intersubjective relationship" (Carson 1998: 42, 46), call Kelly's son a "subject/object" (Skilbeck 2011), while the artist talks of an "intersubjective discourse through which not only the child but also the mother is constituted as subject" (1977: 22). In accordance with Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's observations that "autobiographical subjects do not predate experience" (2001: 25), in this section Kelly expands the limits of conventional autobiographical writing

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[6] The given name of Mary Kelly's son is Kelly, which may spark confusion in relation to his mother's last name. I have not been able to find information on the reasons for this doubling of the name Kelly.

(2001: 142), as the text transcends the two speaking subjects and, at the same time, fundamentally affects their formation. This liminal experience of a discursive, relational subject brings to mind Smith and Watson's observations of the production of the autobiographic subject and the subject's relational character (2001: 37-42, 58-67): it is *via* a discursive and an embodied relationship that the two subjects are formed.

The intersubjective middle section of Part Six is followed at the bottom by a typed script of the mother's voice recording the events of the day. One of the entries reads:

> April, 12, 1978. It was his first day at 'proper' school today. Ray [the husband] and I went along and waited with all the other anxious parents and neat children for our turn to 'check-in' with head-mistress. (…) I tried to sound cheerful and articulate (Ray acted ultra-casual which infuriated me). (…) I think [the school] is definitely too rough and Kelly is still too little. (Kelly 1985*:* 183)

This non-experimental diary-like narrative offers a completely different perspective from the former two. It is closest to the classical autobiographic narrative: highly conventionalized narrative-wise, written in the Past tense, emotionally calculated ("I tried to sound cheerful and articulate") and objective-like. This section provides the social context and a sense of chronology, anchoring the events in a culturally neutralized narrative. At the same time, of all three texts, this one is furthest removed from the actual mother-child interaction.

In the above paragraphs, I have retraced all six parts of Mary Kelly's *Post-partum document* in order to demonstrate Kelly's ingenious manipulating of the ready-made discourses on motherhood with her attempt to tackle her lived experience as a mother.[7] As I have partly shown, the artist's pioneering attempt to artistically translate an individual maternal experience into "the social and the political" (Barry and Flitterman-Lewis 2003: 59) is reflected in the work's experimental form. In order to take a closer look at the way in which *Post-partum document*'s narrative voices play out the motherhood's experiential/ideological aporia, I need to discuss several other aspects of Kelly's formal experimentation. I am going to focus on those that most clearly contribute to Kelly's challenging the traditional autobiographical format.

One point that I have already partly discussed is Kelly's cunning application of pastiched scientific language. In *Post-partum document*, she performatively employs various scientific discourses, among them: Linnaean taxonomy, obstetric discourse, Lacanian diagrams, feeding charts, and language acquisition schemas. All of them are studded with scientific terminology, for example: "research," "index,"

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7 In Kelly's words, in *Post-partum document* she aimed to combine her "lived experience as a mother and [her] analysis as feminist of that experience" (Kelly qtd. in Iversen 1981: 207).

"function," "documentation" "context," "analysed utterance," "holophrastic speech," "transitional object," "dysmenorrhoea," "buccal pitocin," "intravenous infusion," "linea migra," "habitat," etc. By doing so, Kelly reproduces the ideologically recognized mother subject positions: a biological container for the fetus, the primal nourisher, the archetypal care-taker, a stay-at-home comfort provider, and others. In the Preface published in a book-edition of *Post-partum document,* the artist explains that, "One motive for appropriating a certain pseudo-scientific language … was to counter the assumption that childcare is based on the woman's natural and instinctive understanding of the role of mothering" (1982: xviii). Kelly's application of mock-scientific discourses replicates the ideological understandings of mothering and makes vivid their artificiality. At the same time, it creates a sense of distance, emotional detachment and authority,[8] while reproducing images of fragmentary and disjointed functions of the maternal subject. Most significantly, it represses the mother-child affection, which only comes to the surface as an undercurrent in cathected material objects and in the already discussed unconventional, "incorrect" liminal writing. By producing such cognitive clash, Kelly demonstrates how thoroughly scientific narratives schematize the experience of early motherhood and how they rob it of the affective dimension.

However, as *Post-partum document* makes clear, the language of science is not the only narrative that misrecognizes lived motherhood. The same castrating effect applies to the discourse of child-care institutions, abundantly replicated by Kelly in the bottom sections of the *Document*'s Part Six, for example:

> Parents (i.e. mothers) are required to help supervise children at the playgroup once a fortnight. (Kelly 1985: 170)
> Today I was told about the "gang of six" (troublesome boys) of which Kelly is apparently one. The supervisor said they were "very loud" (…) (Kelly 1985: 174)
> I went for the interview at the new nursery to-day. (…) I had to bring Kelly along. I dressed him in his navyblue coat. He looked very neat an I tried to make myself look "respectable" too (…) (Kelly 1985: 176)

Imitating the institutional language with precision and putting certain words in quotation marks, Kelly makes its specificity strongly pronounced while distancing herself from its disciplining effect. This way she effectively underscores the performative aspect of her being a pre-school child's mother who submits herself to the institutional routine. In their book on autobiography, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson cite anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner who "situates agency in the ability with which people play the 'games' of culture – with their rules and

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[8] I would argue that at some points they become grotesque, as for example in Part Five, plants and bugs given to the mother by the child are captioned with their Latin names and systematic information concerning their habitat, and the date and place of collection.

structures – with wit and intelligence" (2001: 44). By showing the rigidity of the institutional frameworks, Kelly resists them by demonstrating that the ideologically-recognized positions of the maternal subject are in fact empty signifiers when it comes to the mother's lived experience. This way, Kelly outwits the discursive regimes by playing their game: she impersonates institutional "games" of culture, performs them by re-enacting her motherhood as an institution (e.g. puts on a mask of a "respectable" mother), and, by doing so, self-knowingly misrecognizes herself in her lived maternal experience. Pointedly, Kelly observed that "[a]lthough the mother's story is my story, *Post-partum document* is not an autobiography. (…) It suggests an interplay of voices – the mother's experience, feminist analysis, academic discussion, political debate" (1982: xviii). Kelly's theoretical awareness allows one to read *Post-partum document* as an example of women's life writing which employs "subject positions that narrators negotiate within the constraints of discursive regimes that prohibit that speaking" (Gilmore qtd. in Smith and Watson 2001: 145). This strategy is made particularly vivid in the way *Post-partum document* ends: the final sentences of the last "stone" of Part Six read: "Things have definitely changed, and so quickly. When I told Rosalind that [my son]'d started infant's school she said 'well, you're a *real mother* now'" (184, emphasis mine). The off-hand comment "well, you're a real mother now" is symptomatic of the double coding of *Post-partum document*: the fact of entering the institutional system of pre-school education renders the artist "a real mother" on the social plane, while suppressing her lived maternal experience.

Thus it can be argued that Kelly's failure to symbolize her lived experience has been *a priori* inscribed in the very structure of her work, as it is signaled by the *Document*'s time-scope. The documentation starts with the child's weaning from the breast, moves through consecutive phases of other "weanings" and ends with the symbolically final mother-child weaning when the child goes to pre-school and embarks on the way of subjectivity formation *via* linguistic separation.[9] Speaking from within such a narratively challenging site, *Post-partum document* structurally acknowledges the inevitable loss of the child to the Symbolic order. On a larger plane, the installation's temporal bracketing bears historical significance. In the 1970s, when *Post-partum document* was made, more that today, the feminine discourse meant "the negative signification" (Lippard 1983: x) [10]: there was no language, visual arts included, to articulate lived motherhood or,

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[9] In an interview with Ian White, Kelly explains: "I only realised I should stop [working on *Post-partum document*] when [my son] wrote his name. At that point, in a way, he'd become the author" (2007). In Lacanian terms, this was the moment when the son entered the Symbolic or the Name/Law of the Father.

[10] In her elegantly compact summary of Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Woman's Autobiography*, Betty Bergland asks: "[H]ow does the not-male human being, perceived in the culture as the

to be more precise: representations of motherhood had been appropriated by the patriarchal discourse.[11] Kelly's cunning visual-narrative strategy is informed by her theoretical awareness of this symbolic abuse and the constructive character of what in Western culture passes for femininity and motherhood. With this awareness, the artist joins a greater feminist strife of the time to seek novel ways of expressing the feminine experience, as extensively discussed by classics of feminism, among them Hélène Cixous (her claim that "[the woman] writes in white ink" (1997: 352), Laura Mulvey (the concept of the male gaze), Julia Kristeva, Naomi Wolf, Adrienne Rich, Nina Baym, and earlier by Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. In 1977, Mary Kelly herself explained that: "(…) femininity is synonymous with our 'negative signification' in the order of language and culture. It begins even before you're born, when you're given your father's name" (1977: 3). Thus one of the tasks that the hybrid *Post-partum document* undertakes is to make visible "the difficulty of the symbolic order for women" (Kelly 1977: 23).[12] With this in mind, in her work Kelly reverses "the bodily presence and vocal absence which typifies the representation of woman as sign in masculine representation," as pointed out in the earlier quote from Pollock. With her decision not to include in *Post-partum document* any image of her own body, Kelly "contest[s] the ownership of the image" of the woman and of the mother (Kelly 1983: 238). As noted by Juli Carson:

> [In *Post-partum document*] [t]he mother's role [is] consequently doubled for that of the artist, allowing the "subject of inquiry" to incorporate both an analysis of the artist-as-mother's perception and unconscious reiteration of "patriarchal" structure within the discourse of childbirth and child care, as well as the "problematic" related to iconic representations of the woman's body within art practice. (1998: 46)

Other, represent the self? By cultural Other, we generally consider those persons negatively constructed in the dominant symbolic order: not-male, not-white, not-American, etc. Sidonie Smith argues that until the twentieth century women could not represent themselves in scripts male discourse had constructed for them as nun, witch, wife, or queen. Alternatives to these scripts remained linguistically and culturally unimaginable; thus, when cultural others would represent themselves in print, they were forced to use the prevailing symbolic order or remain silent (1994: 131-132).

11 Two helpful books that make this absence clear are Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions* and Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born.*

12 One can take this argument even further, as Craig Owens does in "The Discourse of Others": "[Kelly's work] demonstrates that no one narrative can possibly account for all aspects of human experience" (1983: 64). Owens locates representational shortcomings of *Post-partum document* within the postmodern dogma concerning the limits of language as such. Similarly, in his article on *Post-partum document* Paul Smith notes: "our language is never total, never the homogenous commodity of a unified subjectivity, never wholly rationalized" (1982: 211). I will discuss the intricacies of the autobiographic subject later in this article.

In the above quote, Carson touches upon one of the biggest paradoxes of *Post-partum document*: the maternal body, completely foreclosed visually, is in fact its indispensable, key element. It is the very driving force and a major affective site of the installation, which symptomatically reverberates throughout its contents and which haunts its various narratives. Among the many linguistic glimpses that signal the bodily presence of the mother and its primal function that drives the mother-child relationship, two short dialogues from Part Five are quite exemplary:

> RESEARCH I Homo Sapiens (F)
> Age 2:11, July 29, 1976
> (7:30 A.M., getting into our bed)
> K[elly]. Mummy, where's your willy?
> M. I haven't got one. I'm a girl and you're a boy. You're like Daddy. You two have got one and I don't.
> K. Show me.
> M. Oh Kel… (Kelly 1985: 116)

And:

> RESEARCH II Homo Sapiens (F)
> Age 3:00, September 24, 1976
> (11:30 A.M., coming into the bathroom)
> K. Where does your wee come from? Show me.
> M. There. (Kelly 1985: 120)

Clearly, *Post-partum document*'*s* lived-experience narrative voice is a situated voice, and it is a fundamentally embodied voice, albeit the body is present only by proxy. This radically diverges from the historical, seemingly disembodied autobiographical subject. As noted by Sidonie Smith:

> [S]ubjectivity is not (…) an out-of-body experience. The "autobiographical subject" of bourgeois humanism may have emerged as a unitary, essentialized "self," somehow locally and universally operative irrespective of or despite the bodily surround; and the body and its desires might have been banished to the border of consciousness through the ideological enshrinement. (1994: 266-267)

Smith accurately describes the type of subjectivity that *Post-partum document* powerfully undermines: it renders bare the ideological enshrinement of the classical autobiographic subject, as its limited and limiting nature is made poignantly vivid. While demonstrating this impotence, *Post-partum document* codes the affective contents elsewhere, standing up for "human experiences outside discursive narratives – feelings of the body, feelings of spirituality, powerful sensory memories of events and images" (Smith and Watson 2001: 26). Negotiating the multiple narrative "I's," the installation brings into gallery space what until today

is very often hidden, made taboo and disregarded: the difficulty, inconclusiveness, ambivalence and provisionality of mothering. In the words of Laura Mulvey, Kelly's works grapples with "the contradictory emotions that necessarily come with motherhood" (1976: 201), taking its force, as Paul Smith has put it, "from a certain negation of the social contract by the dialectic of desire" (1982: 210). This way, *Post-partum document* both acknowledges and eludes the ideological interpellations of mothering.

Significantly, as I have already pointed out, with every section of *Post-partum document* the repressed maternal voice leaks out until it completely disappears when the child writes his name. The installation's Introductory section clearly summarizes this leaking out of the maternal voice on a series of the son's vests, crisscrossed with Lacanian diagrams (Kelly 1985: 3-6). As Margaret Iversen observes: "Each unit of the series adds one line to the completion of the diagram, until finally the T-shirt is literally crossed out, denied" (1981: 208). Thus in a way, the Introductory section summarizes what *Post-partum document* seeks to retrace: the gradual disappearance of the mother-child dyad.[13] A sense of ridding of the maternal voice also comes out in the words of Lucy Lippard who commented on *Post-partum document* in the following way: "I 'liked' … the sense of rigorous analysis applied to the intimate memories of the mother-child relationship (1983: ix). Lippard recalls her experiencing "the simultaneity of sensual immediacy and immediate nostalgia" she remembered from her own earlier maternal experience (ix), calling *Post-partum document* "the rationalization of a difficult experience" (xi). Similarly, Rosemary Betterton notes: "What troubled me was the way in which [*Post-partum document*'s] distancing excluded representation of the ambivalent emotions of love and hate, guilt and loss in relation to the maternal body that shape our psychic lives" (qtd. in McCloskey 2012: 10).[14] In the Preface to a *Post-partum document*'s book edition, Mary Kelly explains that: "*Post-partum document* is not simply about child development. It is an effort to articulate the mother's fantasies, her desire, her stake in that project called 'motherhood.' (…) A problem is continually posed but no resolution is reached" (1982: xvii). Earlier on, the artist explained that *Post-partum document* "does not describe the unified, transcendental subject of autobiography, but rather, the decentered, socially constituted subject of a mutual discourse" (1977: 23). Thus Kelly's work employs a "process of documentation to introduce and interrogate the concept of the subject" (McCloskey

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13 An insightful analysis of the complexity of motherhood can be found in Julia Kristeva's "Motherhood today" at: http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html.

14 Further along this line, in 2010, Simone O'Callaghan complained that "Kelly has deliberately removed herself and her son, as people from the work and they become the focus of a supposed impartial scientific study, making the artwork feel more like it has been created by a man" (2010). As I aim to demonstrate in this article, I believe that it was Kelly's strategic move: she wanted to replicate this discourse in order to falsify it and expose its limitations.

2012: 1), both of the child and the mother. All these quotations point to the same concern: the lack of a discourse of the maternal subject that would be representative of the difficulty and inconclusiveness of the mother's lived experience, a lack that *Post-partum document* makes so acutely vivid.

Interestingly, in her experimental quest for the inherently conflicted maternal voice, Kelly stays in tune with or even predates the developments in literary and cultural studies at the time, which, in the words of Leigh Gilmore, "focused on the analytical and experimental category of the 'self' and the limits of its representation" (1994: 5). In accordance with Gilmore's observations on autobiography and trauma, in *Post-partum document* "conflicting demands on both the self and narrative (…) prompt formal experimentation (…) and lead to texts that are not, strictly speaking, autobiography, but are nonetheless deeply engaged with its central concerns."[15] Fueled by feminism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and a critique of conceptual art, the *Document* strives to fashion new ways of expressing the silenced aspects of the maternal experience. In this strife, the lived experience becomes a chief category that resists representation. As noted by Smith and Watson,

> Experience (…) is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in the social realm, identities constituted through material, cultural, economic, and interpsychic relations. "It is not individuals who have experience," [Joan W.] Scott claims, "but subjects who are constituted by experience." Autobiographical subjects do not predate experience. (2001: 25)

In accord with Smith and Watson's description of the autobiographical subject, *Post-partum document* makes vivid that ready-made narratives fail to account for the dynamic and processual character of the maternal experience. They are not only unable to address the formation of the maternal subject in its lived experience, but they also suppress and depreciate its strife for self-expression. Thus it can be argued that the eventually muted and vastly inarticulate voice that strives to tell the "real" experience of mothering articulates in fact a profound lack of discourse of the individual maternal experience,[16] while making clear the inapplicability of the culturally recognized narratives. *Post-partum document* performs this exact aporia.

However, I believe that the apparent failure on the part of Kelly to account for the mother's lived experience is in fact one of the biggest strengths of her work. Reflecting on women's art, Julia Kristeva observed that: "Because of this coincidence of language and patriarchy, the feminine is, metaphorically, set on the side

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15 Cornell University Press publisher's description of Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography*. (http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/?GCOI=80140100429370).

16 An insightful account of the absence of the maternal in Western culture can be found in (Walker 1989).

of the heterogeneous, the unnameable, and the unsaid. But the radial potential of women's art practice lies precisely in this coincidence, since, insofar as the feminine is said, it is profoundly subversive" (qtd. in Kelly 1977: 23). Echoing Kristeva, it is my belief that Kelly's appropriation of the masculine language in a feminine art practice, coupled with her demonstration of the impossibility of the "real" mother's voice, makes *Post-partum document* profoundly subversive. Kelly's performative reproduction of pseudo-scientific languages can be read as a re-enactment of the cultural repression and invalidation of the lived maternal experience. The artist employs the very language that upholds and legitimizes this repression: the masculine language of science, diagrams, statistics, data collection etc., a language in which and through which the ambivalent maternal experience is repressed and degraded. To put it simply: Kelly documents the maternal silence within patriarchy in the very language of patriarchy in order to manifest its castrating effect. Her idea then is not to desperately try to document the mother/child experience and fail, but to document the impossibility of this kind of documentation within the existing narrative frameworks. As Griselda Pollock has pointedly put it: "a patriarchal system (…) is exposed precisely at the points when discourse fails and the mother has no words for the feminine placed outside representation" (1988: 170). *Post-partum document* offers then fetishized traces and linguistic signs of the "sweetness of [an] imaginary [mother-child] encapsulation which reduces the 'outside world' to absurdity" (Kelly qtd. in Isaak 1985: 204), but also of the frustration and powerlessness of the motherly condition. By replicating existing ideological fictions of the maternal subject, Kelly strips bare the shortcomings and violence of culturally recognized linguistic symbolization, while signaling an existence of bodily and affective experiences that go beyond it. Smith and Watson conclude one of their chapters writing that "getting a life means getting a narrative" (80). As *Post-partum document* shows, the lived maternal experience does not get a narrative. Instead, it surfaces in symptoms and formal linguistic experiments, the after-effects of the emotional tangle and of the *jouissance* of the mother-child interaction.

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