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“Performing Pregnant: An Aesthetic Investigation of Pregnancy”

Introduction

In 2011, artist Marni Kotak presented *The Birth of Baby X*, a durational performance piece that culminated in the live birth of her son, Ajax. For this work, she transformed the Microscope Gallery in Brooklyn, NY into a birthing center, including various personal, practical, and symbolic items, such as an inflatable birthing pool, a kitchenette, and two ten foot trophies—one for Baby X for being born and the other for Kotak for giving birth. She also incorporated snapshots from her pregnancy and baby shower that were made into wallpaper, rugs, sheets, blankets, and a serving tray, making her birthing center into an immersive photographic album. Interspersed throughout the installation, there were a number of personal relics, like her grandmother’s bed and her mother’s rocking chair, fleshing out this collection to contain the traces of her family’s genealogy. On October 25, 2011, she gave birth to Ajax with the assistance of a mid-wife and a doula in front of a restricted audience of about 15 people.

Unlike the videos and photographs of live births that have come to populate the Internet, Kotak’s performance manifested as a multi-sensory event. This piece, along with other works Kotak has created in conjunction with her pregnancy and post-partum experiences, explicitly manifest the idea that pregnancy is a creative process. Her merger of art and life through the act of giving birth in a gallery challenges the norms of delivery while framing her actions in the context of contemporary art and aesthetics. This performance work is significant because it blurs the distinction between bodily pregnancy and creative production. Consistent with Amy Mullin’s interpretation of some examples of feminist body art, Kotak undermines the assumption that bodily pregnancies are “to be valued only because and only when they lead
to the birth of children.” Instead of treating pregnancy as a state to be endured, physical pregnancy can function as a source for intellectual growth and creative exploration. Performances by pregnant artists, including Kotak, Cathy Van Eck, and Sandy Huckleberry, counter the containment of maternal subjectivity through the medicalisation of pregnancy as well as challenge a questionable legacy of representations of pregnancy in art, which historically have been dominated by images of the Virgin Mary. In their performances, where art is treated as a realm for corporeal exploration, pregnancy becomes the impetus for aesthetic experience.

In this essay, I explore how the aesthetics of pregnancy and childbirth in art persists as a controversial topic that also offers a platform for exploring the pregnant body in the cultural consciousness by building on Iris Marion Young’s phenomenological understanding of pregnancy and Martin Heidegger’s treatment of the essence of technology as Gestell (enframing). Young argues that advances in ante-natal technology in association with the increased medicalisation of pregnancy have progressively alienated the mother-to-be from reproductive processes and the birthing experience. According to Young, emphasis is transferred from the lived-body experience of the pregnant subject to medical discourse, which tends to standardise this process while also minimising the presence of the mother-to-be as a subject. The impact of technology on pregnancy is examined using Martin Heidegger’s definition of enframing, or the understanding that technology reduces pregnant women to mere resources. I argue that enframing is not just restricted to medical discourse, but can be found in the visual arts. Julia Kristeva describes how in many works of art, particularly in depictions of the Virgin Mary, the artist reduces the pregnant woman to a sign—an image that comes to replace her experience. She is silenced through these.

imaginary, visual presentations that perpetuate idealised, patriarchal ideas regarding the maternal.

In order to counteract the alienation of the pregnant subject, Young proposes that pregnancy can be experienced from an aesthetic perspective. Moreover, the pregnant body becomes a site of interest, curiosity, and wonder, as opposed to a collection of symptoms that make the body inadequate, abnormal, and estranged. I build upon Young’s proposal by suggesting that pregnancy does not just allow for a reflexive intrasubjectivity, but as a liminal bodily experience, it also involves intersubjective relationships between the pregnant woman, the foetus, and others. Through performance, artists draw attention to the experience of pregnancy as itself a process of transformation, as opposed to treating it as a state to be endured that is only valued when resulting in the birth of a child.

Performance artists who merge the experience of pregnancy with art facilitate the ability to consider pregnancy in aesthetic terms, as they welcome the type of reception that people bring to an artistic encounter to the sensorial perception of pregnancy. Moreover, aesthetic in this context means that pregnancy is perceived in the manner a person would a work of art or theatre event. Emphasis is placed on the experience, as opposed to the outcome. Perception is treated as synaesthetic, incorporating the visual and sonic, as well as “physical sensations of the entire body.” German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte focuses on the role of perception in shaping the dynamic of a performance, where the conditions for perception are informed by the spatial arrangements or staging of a work as well as certain types of embodiment. Perception also functions as a mode of relation that involves the interplay of various subjects, which in these cases include the pregnant woman, the fetus, and observers.

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2 Ibid., 59.
—an intersubjective exchange that unfolds in real time and space. The immediacy of the performance encounter opens a potentiality absent in other forms of artistic production. When performing, artists respond to the audience in a cognitive, physical, and emotional manner, both intentionally and unintentionally. The unfinished and incomplete qualities of performance art allow the event to be directly informed by audience presence. At the same time, performance art involves the merging of the roles of the artist, artwork, and the pregnant woman, offering an opportunity to consider subjectivity in pregnancy that other media do not offer so explicitly. The immediacy of the performance encounter opens a potentiality absent in other forms of artistic production. When performing, artists respond to the audience in a cognitive, physical, and emotional manner, both intentionally and unintentionally. The unfinished and incomplete qualities of performance art open the event to being directly informed by audience presence.

Fischer-Lichte emphasizes how performance encapsulates a distinctive type of aesthetic experience—an aesthetics of the performative:

[The aesthetics of the performative] identifies performances not as the allegory and image of human life but both as human life in itself and simultaneously as its model. The lives of all participants are entwined in performance, not just metaphorically but in actual fact. [...] The reenchantment of the world is accomplished through the linkage of art and life, which is the aim of the aesthetics of the performative.4

The “reenchantment of the world” that Fischer-Lichte describes is the transformative potential of performance as a liminal experience where art and life merge.5 In these moments, according to Marvin Carlson in his analysis of Fischer-Lichte, there is “sudden deeper insight into the shared process of being in the world.”6 In the works to be discussed, artists Marni

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4 Ibid., 206.
5 Ibid., 190.
Kotak, Cathy Van Eck, and Sandy Huckleberry use pregnancy as the impetus for shared, embodied aesthetic experiences, providing the potential for transformation through performance in a manner that counters the restricted treatment of the pregnant subject as perpetuated in medical discourse and art history. Art becomes a way of communicating the phenomenological changes of the pregnant body, a means of re-asserting the woman’s presence as a subject in both pregnancy and delivery, and an opportunity to explore the maternal in the cultural imagination.

Pre-conceptions of the Maternal

With the Birth of Baby X, Kotak invited spectators to appreciate the act of giving birth as an aesthetic experience. Framing the performance within the conventions of the gallery context welcomes attendees to not restrict their perception of pregnancy to medical definitions, but to engage with it as one would a work of art. As Fischer-Lichte notes, “[p]erformance induces an extraordinary state of permanently heightened attention in the spectator, thus transforming what has been ordinary into components of aesthetic experience.”

Admittedly, Marni Kotak’s work—act of giving birth in a gallery—comprises an intersection between art and pregnancy that can be challenging for some audiences to appreciate. Unsurprisingly, The Birth of Baby X received a range of responses in the US media even prior to its presentation, evoking popular debates regarding the perceived ethical implications and possible safety concerns associated with Kotak’s actions. While some bloggers, including one for the Washington Post, noted that the work is not so controversial in today’s Facebook and YouTube society, where the public display of images of births have become commonplace,

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other commentators labeled Kotak as self-absorbed and narcissistic. Additionally, some people questioned whether the piece could be considered art. In a comment to the Village Voice interview with Kotak, one person states: “Art requires talent/skill. Motherhood, while requiring much more hard work, does not require either of these. This is not art. It's exploitation. Poor Baby X will be scarred for life from its inception.” Commentators vented judgmental expressions on the numerous blogs and news sites reporting the work, condemning Kotak as an artist, woman, and mother. As people attempted to shame Kotak, this digital simulacrum of a debate on web sites and social media reveals how perceptions of pregnancy and childbirth remain a contested terrain in the twenty-first century. These comments and popular observations, many of which come with disparaging sentiments about what it means to give birth and become a mother, reveal more about people’s attitudes regarding motherhood and cultures of mother-blaming, or the tendency to judge a mother’s actions when it comes to raising children, than offering insight into the work itself. Female reproduction, which extends beyond pregnancy and the act of giving birth to the abortion debate and contraception, is regulated and heavily contested in the United States, Ireland, and other nations, where political authorities, religious doctrine, and medical science dominate motherhood.”

11 Mother-blaming is not a new phenomenon. As the mother tends to be the primary caretaker of a child, she is commonly held responsible when something goes wrong, even if she has no influence on the child’s actions. In the twenty-first century with the advent of social media, the ability to judge a mother’s decisions in raising a child have reached a larger public audience, with stories being shared rapidly and people are able to add their opinions through exhaustive comment sections. For more information about mother-blaming, please refer to Beverly Burns and Niza ben-Ner, “Psychoanalysis Constructs Motherhood,” in The Different Faces of Motherhood, ed. Beverly Burns and Dale Hay (New York: Springer, 2013). and Denise Sommerfeld, “The Origins of Mother Blaming: Historical Perspectives on Childhood and Motherhood, “Infant Mental Health Journal 10, no. 1 (1989).
discourse, cultural attitudes, and legislation. Ironically, the controversy that Kotak’s work evoked on-line emphasises the necessity of artistic interventions in order to reveal how understandings of pregnancy can be so structured and restrained.

Pregnancy and birth, like performance art, constitute a series of unfolding events that are unstable and can be unpredictable. During pregnancy, the woman’s body transforms — biologically, psychically, socially, and culturally. In conjunction with these growth processes, her identity morphs through complex exchanges of individual agency, institutional and social influences. As Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler point out: “Even a desired, ‘natural’ pregnancy is a complicated physical, psychological and social passage, both intensely private and unavoidably public. […] Pregnancy links the most intimate aspects of a woman's body with ideas about the wellbeing of the social body.”12 The pregnant woman is doubled and decentered with bodily boundaries blurring through a phenomenological process of growth and transformation. In her re-consideration of the female body through the lens of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Carol Bigwood describes the human body as a living or phenomenological body that “is not fixed but continually emerges anew out of an ever changing weave of relations to earth and sky, things, tasks, and other bodies.”13 With a shifting body schema, a pregnant woman can become both aware and estranged from her own body through an uncanny corporeal relationship. Iris Marion Young explores this process in her essay, “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation.” For Young, these changes make a woman hyper-aware of her body and how it moves. Starting from Julia Kristeva’s treatment of pregnancy as a splitting of the subject, Young describes how during pregnancy the body changes in conjunction with the growth of the fetus, whose movements make the mother-to-be attuned to a doubling of the subject. These motions are both connected to the female body,

but also independent of her actions. As Young notes: “the fetus’s movements are wholly mine, completely within me, conditioning my experience and space. Only I have access to these movements from their origin, as it were.”14 As such, pregnancy interrupts the integration of bodily experience, blurring the boundaries and disrupting the distinction between the internal (what is mine) and external (what is other). In turn, the pregnant woman poses a threat to understandings of the subject as a unified or stable whole.

The Question Concerning Antenatal Technology

Young stresses how “at a phenomenological level the pregnant woman has a unique knowledge of her body processes and the life of the fetus.”15 However, she argues that advances in antenatal technology associated with the increased medicalisation of pregnancy have contributed to the progressive alienation of the mother-to-be from reproductive processes and the birthing experience.16 She states: “the use of instruments provides a means of objectifying the pregnancy and birth that alienates a woman because it negates and devalues her own experience of those processes.”16

Technology, including the fetal Doppler monitor and the ultrasound, externalises the presence of the fetus so that a woman’s intimate knowledge of her pregnancy is no longer required as it is “replaced by more objective means of observation.”17 For example, ultrasound images focus on the fetus, visually circumventing the woman with the womb functioning as a shadowed container. While the diagnostic purpose of the imagery is to measure the growth and development of the fetus, these images externalise internal processes making the pregnant woman’s embodied observations unnecessary. Ultrasound imagery has earned a

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 58.
17 Ibid.
place in numerous cultures as providing the first images of the child. In her analysis of the use of fetal medical images by the anti-choice organization Operation Rescue, Peggy Phelan states: “[f]etal imagery locates reproductive visibility as a term and an image independent of the woman’s body […] [i]n making the fetus the focus of the visible spectacle of the demonstrations, Operation Rescue subtly erases the pregnant woman herself.” Through their public performances, Operation Rescue appropriates these images in order to present the fetus as an autonomous subject in need of salvation. In addition, Barbara Katz Rothman emphasises how there is an increased tendency to treat fetuses as separate patients within medically managed pregnancies, with the language used in this context — that is, the use of the phrase “being delivered” and as opposed to “giving birth” — further contributing to the erasure of the maternal subject.

The impact of technology on the medical understanding of pregnancy can be examined using Martin Heidegger’s definition of Gestell. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger explores humanity’s relationship to the essence of technology. He argues that technology is “a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence in the realm where

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20 In Ireland, the treatment of the fetus as a separate patient is legally institutionalized as it is written into the nation’s constitution. According to the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Act, 1983: “The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.”

revealing and unconcealment take place, where *alēthia*, truth, happens.22 He describes the essence of technology as *Gestell*, or enframing:

> Enframing means the gathering together of the setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological.23

This challenging forth is problematic for Heidegger. Challenging forth is what causes the mode of ordering that Heidegger refers to as standing-reserve, or the tendency to treat the world as merely an energy resource for production and consumption.24 When something is allocated to standing-reserve, it becomes disposable.

It is important to emphasise that Heidegger is more interested in examining the essence of technology as opposed to limiting his discussion to its mechanics. According to Gregory Ulmer, “From Heidegger’s point of view, the danger of technology is that its rigid cause-and-effect enframing order might blind humanity to alternative orders. It is not the technology itself, but this blindness to its enframing, that must be confronted.”25 This essence of technology concerns Heidegger, since it blocks other forms of revealing, including *poiēsis*.26

When defining *poiēsis*, Heidegger states:

> It is of utmost importance that we think bringing-forth in its full scope and at the same time in the sense in which the Greeks thought it. Not only handicraft manufacture, not only artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery, is a bringing-forth, *poiēsis*.27

23 Ibid., 20.
24 Ibid., 19.
27 Ibid., 10.
In other words, Heidegger does not limit *poiēsis* to the act of artistic production, but extends it to encompass the unconcealment of truth—*alēthia*. Moreover, when considering Heidegger’s definition of technology, technology is not inherently problematic, but how it is utilized: whether it is used for the challenging forth of enframing or the bringing forth of *poiēsis*. Heidegger emphasises this point when he refers to Friedrich Hölderin’s poetic verse: “But where the danger is, grows / The saving power also.” That is, if enframing, the essence of technology, is what poses the supreme danger, then it “must harbour in itself the growth of the saving power.” Therefore, the medical apparatuses that have come to dominate understandings of pregnancy in the twentieth century, which Young is quick to point out as leading to the alienation of pregnant women, are not inherently the problem. Rather, it is how these technologies are used, along with the political legislation and religious agendas that draw from scientific findings to regulate pregnancy, that turn women into standing-reserve, delegating them into a resource and placing their subjectivity under erasure.

In the performance, *Double Beat*, Dutch sound artist and composer Cathy von Eck creates a scenario that challenges the alienation of pregnant women through the creative re-purposing of a consumer Doppler machine. For this work, von Eck connects one Doppler to measure her heart beat and another to her unborn baby. The audio output from these devices is fed into her computer, which is connected to loudspeakers so it is audible to the audience. The sounds are processed depending on the volume of her blowing air into a bag. As the work progresses, the heart beats transition from being in a pure state to gaining pitches and becoming cords through electronic processing. In the culmination of the performance, the heart beats are slowly transformed into musical chords, “derived from the Cold Genius’s solo in the ‘Frost Scene’ of the opera *King Arthur* (1691) by Henry Purcell, a piece that is dealing with

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28 Ibid., 11 – 12.
30 Ibid.
death.”31 Through this performance, von Eck uses her breath as the driving force that converts her heartbeat and that of her unborn daughter’s into a musical composition — a performance that merges life with its antecedent and death. A consumer, medical device that Young describes as contributing to the alienation of mothers-to-be is re-purposed by a pregnant woman through live performance. In Heidegger’s terms, the mode of revealing in this performance is poiēsis, which brings something forth into being, in contrast to the challenging forth of enframing that treat pregnant women as merely a resource.32 At the same time, this creative act allows Cathy von Eck to connect with her pregnancy as an embodied and phenomenological experience through the aesthetic event of live performance.

Artistic Legacies

While medicalisation has facilitated the alienation of mothers-to-be from the embodied and phenomenological aspects of pregnancy, this process did not begin with modern medical technology. Rosemary Betterton emphasizes how throughout in European visual culture “the maternal body is conceptualized as a container for the unborn child, either as the sacred vessel of divinity enshrined in the Catholic maternal ideal or in the biomedical construction of the pregnant body as a receptacle for embryonic life.”33 Rather, it encompasses an attitude that is detected in earlier visual representations of pregnant women in art, specifically images depicting the Virgin Mary. For example, according to Brendan Cassidy, in some early Byzantine iconographic images of the Madonna, Jesus is presented in a medallion placed on her breast. In some Northern European renditions of Mary’s visitation to Elizabeth, artists offer a view inside the womb to allow spectators to catch a glimpse of the unborn Christ. Later Tuscan illustrations of the pregnant virgin, referred to as Madonna del Parto, offer a

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32 Heidegger, The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, 10.
33 Betterton, 2014 #1173 @5}
more naturalistic vision of pregnancy, though are still laden with symbolic imagery to
emphasise the presence of Christ. In a fresco painting by Piero della Francesca (ca. 1457),
the Madonna stands erect as two hieratically scaled angels part curtains decorated with the
images of pomegranates, a symbol of fertility. Some art historians interpret this tent as the
tabernacle, which Mary also symbolises, with her functioning as the container for Jesus.

The parting duplicates the stretched material of her maternity dress, placing emphasis on her
stomach area while also alluding to the parting of the vaginal lips in birth. When the fresco
first appeared, it was a focus of devotion for local women, though it is unclear whether it was
thought that the image could cure infertility or lead to a successful pregnancy. Historian
James R. Banker emphasises the distinctive, naturalistic presence of Mary in this painting
when he states “[f]ew images of Mary by Piero or other fifteenth-century painters possess the
gravity of this young woman. The image seems to belong to no other narrative than that of a
young woman managing her pregnancy with grace and poise.”

In contrast to other
depictions of Mary created in his time, Piero presented an idealised model of pregnancy that
focused on Mary’s body. However, this initial use was undermined as Catholic authorities
drew attention away from the painting and admonishing its affiliated fertility cults in the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Emphasis is shifted from Mary’s bodily experience of
pregnancy, delegating her role to a vessel containing Christ.

Additionally, depictions of the Virgin Mary eradicate a pregnant woman’s sensuality through
claims of immaculate conception, resulting in what Michelle Bolous Walker refers to as “the
impossible dilemma of femininity under patriarchy. She is appropriated as a vessel for divine

35 Naomi Haskell, Piero Della Francesca, 2nd ed. (Maidstone: Crescent Moon, 2008), 47.
37 Ibid., 101.
productivity, and is represented as both virtuous and asexual.”\textsuperscript{38} Julia Kristeva describes how in many works of art, the artist “speaks where she [the pregnant woman] is not, where she knows not,” reducing her to a sign, an image that comes to replace her experience.\textsuperscript{39} Bolous Walker notes in her reading of Kristeva: “The mother, reduced to an imaginary maternal body, is spoken for by the male artist/son. She herself never speaks. This great debt to motherhood, owed by Western art, is never repaid by recognising her right to speak for herself.”\textsuperscript{40} These representations of pregnancy, embodied in the religious figure of the Virgin Mary, reveal the maternal in an unattainable way — pregnancy without sexual intercourse—while placing the pregnant woman in what Heidegger refers to as standing-reserve, delivering the ideology of Christianity through the iconography of the bump. It is this legacy that certain artists, like Kotak and Von Eck, are challenging by attempting to (re)introduce the pregnant woman as a site for investigating subjectivity, presenting the experience of pregnancy as an aesthetic encounter.

\textbf{Why Performance Art?}

I am focusing on performance art in this exploration of pregnancy as an aesthetic encounter since this medium evokes multi-sensory experiences that unfold in real time and space. Additionally, performance art allows for the merging of the roles of the artist, artwork, and the pregnant woman, offering an opportunity to explore the question of subjectivity in pregnancy that other media do not offer so explicitly. The immediacy of the performance encounter opens a potentiality absent in other forms of artistic production. Amelia Jones states:

\textsuperscript{40} Boulous Walker, \textit{Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence}, 118.
In the case of static visual artworks, the intersubjectivity rarely involves the simultaneous presence of the two subjects in question in the same space. With ‘live’ performances the potential is for both performer and viewer to be changed through this empathetic relation as they are, presumably, in the same space at the same time.\(^{41}\)

When performing, artists respond to the audience in a cognitive, physical, and emotional manner—both intentionally and unintentionally. The unfinished and incomplete qualities of performance art open the event to being directly informed by audience presence. In her attempts to articulate an aesthetics of the performative, Erika Fischer-Lichte investigates the bodily relationship between audience and performer. She describes how in performance, embodiment is experienced and empathised with other bodies, which includes those of the audience, meaning that each performance has a unique manifestation.\(^{42}\) A performance, therefore, results from the bodily co-presence of the performer and spectators, which creates a relationship of co-subjects that contributes to the production and reception of meaning.\(^{43}\)

At the same time, in performance, according to Fischer-Lichte, meaning is made unstable as “objects and actions are no longer dependent on the meanings attributed to them. As events that reveal these special characteristics, artistic performance opens up the possibility for all participants to experience a metamorphosis.”\(^{44}\) Moreover, objects, materials, and bodies can be transformed, taking on new meanings as the artist manipulates them through gestural exchanges. At the same time, materials inform how a piece is staged, becoming the formal elements that frame an event, incorporating visual, aural, and proprioceptive qualities.

Performance art is not just an image, but a multi-sensory event that offers various means of relating to an audience, with the audience in turn relating to the performer. As such, the ideas...

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\(^{44}\) Ibid., 22.
a performance conveys are not always predetermined, as the unfolding of time in space-invites unpredictable gestures and insights. Therefore, Marni Kotak did not just give birth in a gallery in *The Birth of Baby X*. Rather, she carefully transformed the space as she frames her pregnancy and birth as a shared aesthetic experience.

Nevertheless, performance art does not inherently defy the legacy of erasing pregnant women’s subjectivity in art. At the 2014 Dublin Live Art Festival, artist Chun Hua Catherine Dong presented the work *Pregnancy*. Spread over the course of a week, Dong spent two hours each day in a dog cage appearing to be six months pregnant. This action took place outside of the gallery context and was presented in an empty lot at a busy intersection in Portobello, Dublin. The image was striking—the sight of a heavily pregnant woman wearing a white dress, crammed into a restrictive space.

However, Dong was not actually pregnant. Instead, she wore a silicon bump and maternity dress during her time at the festival. She began her “pregnancy” when she arrived in Dublin and for ten days Dong claims that she “lived as a pregnant woman.” Even outside of the cage, Dong continued to wear the bump, leading people to believe that she was pregnant. The week culminated with her participation in the 2014 Dublin Pro-Choice March, resulting in a series of arresting images of a heavily pregnant woman with her fist raised in the air, marching with thousands of people in support of safe, legal access to abortion in Ireland. As such, the performance functions as a pro-choice political statement while supporting women’s reproductive rights in Ireland.

Despite the intentions of the artist to raise the visibility of pregnant women, the work is problematic. The only way in which Dong transformed her body is by putting on a silicon bump.

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bump, which reaffirms the presumption that pregnancy can be reduced to this physical feature. The bump becomes the metonymy of pregnancy. In her written reflections about this work, Dong claims that by putting on the appearance of a pregnant woman, her behaviours changed; that she became a pregnant woman. However, the bodily changes affiliated with pregnancy entails more than the growth of a bump. While this feature is the most visually apparent physical aspect of pregnancy, it is only one small part of a radical biological and psychological series of changes. Breasts become larger and more tender; the body retains fluid; a woman’s centre of gravity shifts; and overall body schema transforms; hormonal changes lead to alterations (at times drastic) in emotional responses; fatigue sets in easily; breathing becomes shallow and can be more difficult; and so on. These are only some of the common changes associated with pregnancy, which as Young points out, lead to sensations of defamiliarisation in one’s own body—a uncanny state of corporeal existence as the body itself becomes foreign. Bigwood emphasises how these changes extend the physical limits of the female body, as they become intertwined with a “mother’s personal and cultural life.” She is enmeshed in an ever-shifting state of becoming.

In pregnancy, a woman actively and continually responds to the fresh “physical” (from the Greek phusis, commonly translated as ‘nature’) upsurge that independently runs through her body with a life of its own. She creatively takes up the profound changes of her body, constantly readjusting her body image and weaving subtle relations to the phusical pulse that has emerged from elsewhere.

Unlike the bump, these changes are not so easily communicated to others, but have a major impact on how a woman functions, including how she moves through space. Even though there are some commonalities between pregnant women, there is no certainty as to what changes actually occur and when they take place, making this time both unpredictable and
unstable. Pregnancy is a whole body—a whole being—experience. To reduce this experience to a prosthetic appendage that sits on the surface of the skin offers a hollowed out rendering of what it means to be pregnant. Moreover, Dong’s engagement is restricted to the cultural image of pregnancy. In her performance, the pregnant woman is not made visible as a subject with agency. Rather, she is placed under erasure, perpetuating the legacy in the Western art canon of the pregnant woman being presented in such a manner: images that reduce her physiological and psychological state to a visible bump.

**From art to aesthetics**

In 1995, performance artist Sandy Huckleberry attended the opening of the exhibition *Neo-Dada: Redefining Art 1958 - 1963* at the Aidekman Gallery in Tufts University. Sipping on club soda and mingling with other attendees, Huckleberry partook in the various activities affiliated with this sort of social gathering, except she was in her ninth month of pregnancy and completely nude. In her recollections of the experience, Huckleberry describes how she performed the typical behaviours associated with gallery openings without acknowledging her state of undress. She engaged with other attendees through face-to-face conversations and was fascinated by the conflicting tension that arose as they expressed desire to look at her body, but did not want to appear inappropriate. Nudity created an opportunity for others to gaze upon a heavily pregnant body, to examine the various external physical changes that accompany pregnancy so close to delivery, which included glimpses of her unborn son’s gestures on the surface of her abdomen. Young describes how in pregnancy, it is possible for a pregnant woman to relate to her body through “innocent narcissism.” She states:

> As I undress in the morning and evening, I gaze in the mirror for long minutes, without stealth or vanity. I do not appraise myself, ask whether I look good enough

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49 Sandy Huckleberry (performance artist) in discussion with the author, September 2014.
for others, but like a child take pleasure in discovering new things in my body. I turn to the side and stroke the taut flesh that protrudes under my breasts.50

During pregnancy, the body can become a site of fascination and exploration. Breasts become larger and more tender; the body retains fluid; a woman’s pace slows as her centre of gravity shifts and the overall body schema transforms; hormonal changes lead to alterations (at times drastic) in emotional responses; fatigue sets in easily; breathing becomes shallow and can be more difficult; and so on. These are only some of the common changes associated with pregnancy, which as Young points out, lead to sensations of defamiliarisation in one’s own body—an uncanny state of corporeal existence as the body itself becomes foreign. Bigwood emphasises how these changes extend the physical limits of the female body, as they become intertwined with a “mother’s personal and cultural life.”51 She is enmeshed in an ever-shifting state of becoming:

In pregnancy, a woman actively and continually responds to the fresh, ‘phusical’ (from the Greek phusis, commonly translated as ‘nature’) surge that independently runs through her body with a life of its own. She creatively takes up the profound changes of her body, constantly readjusting her body image and weaving subtle relations to the phusical pulse that has emerged from elsewhere.52

Even though there are some commonalities between pregnant women, there is no certainty as to what changes actually occur and when they take place, making this time both unpredictable and unstable. Pregnancy is a whole-body—a whole-being—experience.

In Huckleberry’s performance, she took Young’s gestures of innocent narcissism out of the privacy of the bedroom and the reflective surface of the mirror, creating a collective experience that allowed viewers an opportunity to partake in this privileged act of looking. The simultaneous gestures of Huckleberry and her unborn son make both their presences

50 Young, “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation,” 53-54.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
evident, allowing the viewer to shift between them, resulting in an intersubjective encounter between the mother, fetus, and the observer. *Through performance, an artist does not just create an object for the reception of the audience. Instead, presentation and reception are merged as the artist presents herself as the work of art. As such, she occupies the position of creator-subject and art object, which for Fischer-Lichte, transforms her and her audience into co-subjects, where the subject-object relationship is no longer dichotomous, but oscillatory.*  

Subjects relate to each other through co-presence, perception, and response.  

Perception is multifaceted and varies depending on the position of the subject. As the pregnant woman, Huckelberry experiences the movements of her unborn child through internal haptic interactions, while the audience can visually perceive the trace of a gesture through her abdomen. An intersubjective exchange occurs between the various participants, whose experience of the moment will differ depending on sensory stimuli and positionality. The performance takes place between the subjects, whose actions and reactions inform and respond to each other in what Fischer-Lichte refers to as a feedback loop.  

**Even though performance artists are producing artistic events, it is possible to extend the aesthetic appreciation of pregnancy beyond the context of art.**

Young emphasises how the phenomenological changes of pregnancy may be disconcerting, but they do not have to be alienating. Instead, they can be experienced from an aesthetic perspective. *Young’s analysis emerges from both as a creative process and as something that can be appreciated by means of reflective corporeal subjectivity.* Sally Gaddow’s proposal is that it is possible to build an intrasubjective relationship with the body that involves aesthetic immediacy where the “self recognises the body as another manifestation of

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54 Ibid., 32.
55 Ibid., 38.
selfness."\textsuperscript{56} Even though Gadow specifically refers to the body that transforms as the result of illness and ageing, Young applies her theories to pregnancy. By appreciating the body from an aesthetic perspective that is characterised as a "complex balance of form and freedom,"\textsuperscript{57} it is possible to build a dialectical relationship with the changing body, its sensations, and shifting boundaries as a "fullness rather than a lack."\textsuperscript{58} As a result, the pregnant body becomes a site of interest, curiosity, and wonder, as opposed to a collection of symptoms that make the body inadequate, abnormal, and estranged.

Young’s definition of the aesthetic resonates with art historian Erwin Panofsky’s understanding of the term when he states:

\begin{quote}
It is possible to experience every object, natural or man-made, aesthetically. We do this, to express it as simply as possible, when we just look at it (or listen to it) without relating it, intellectually or emotionally, to anything outside itself. When a man looks at a tree from the point of view of a carpenter, he will associate it with the various uses to which he might put the wood; and when he looks at it from the point of view of an ornithologist he will associate it with the birds that might nest in it. [...] Only he who simply and wholly abandons himself to the object of his perception will experience it aesthetically.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

Instead of treating pregnancy from the medical perspective, or even that of an expectant mother, but treating it aesthetically-in the above terms-it can become a source of haptic curiosity, with proprioceptive and corporeal boundaries shifting and distending. Rather than fearing or loathing these changes, treating them as a source of discomfort to be endured, they become a temporary state of bodily transformation to be explored through a position of embodied perception, inside and out.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{58} Young, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," 51.
At the same time, aesthetics is not limited solely to experiences of pleasure or judgments of beauty, though these are not excluded. French philosopher Bernard Stiegler presents an understanding of aesthetics that emerges from an expanded notion of *aesthesis*, or sensory perception, defining it as “that of feeling and sensibility in general.” As such, aesthetics becomes a means of engaging in experience from a position of curiosity, with no limitation on the type or sensations—pleasurable or uncomfortable—that may be evoked. By selecting performance works that blur the boundaries between art and life, emerging from the embodied experience of pregnancy, the artistic encounters provoked can in turn be used to support Young’s call for appreciating how pregnancy itself is valuable as an aesthetic experience. Performance art is an effective impetus for inviting this awareness, as it can transform how people perceive the ordinary.

It is possible to expand upon Young’s interpretation of pregnancy by adding that it does not just allow for reflective intrasubjectivity, but as a liminal bodily experience, also involves intersubjective relationships between the pregnant woman, the fetus, and others. Francine Wynn encourages this approach in her call for a “bodily intervolvement of mother-to-be and the baby-in-the-womb.” Moreover, Wynn breaks from the presumption that intercorporeality begins with birth, arguing that “during pregnancy both mother-to-be and her pre-infant are modified through their intertwining and spreading away.” As with Young and Rothman, Wynn challenges the increasingly dominant position of the fetus in pregnancy put forth by medical technology, arguing that these flattened presentations have come to replace the fullness of corporeal shared experience. However, unlike Young, Wynn shifts from a

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63 Ibid., 5.
woman’s self-conscious experience of the body to incorporate the multi-faceted, and more challenging to pinpoint, duality of the pregnant woman and the fetus: “[Young] leaves unexplored the emerging and chiasmic relationship between mother and her pre-infant, who remains at the level of a possession or object.” Wynn critiques this “possessiveness,” arguing for a phenomenological understanding of pregnancy that does not reside solely in either treating the pregnant woman or fetus as a subject at the expense of the other. In this fashion, Huckleberry’s performance extends the shared subjective experience beyond the pregnant woman and her unborn child to include others in a non-confrontational manner.

Conclusion

How others relate to the pregnant body plays a major role in shaping understandings of subjectivity in pregnancy, whether this discourse has religious, scientific, or public policy connotations. Currently, a majority of Many constructs and images have perpetuated an aesthetics of pregnancy that leave little room for consideration of the pregnant woman’s subjectivity, either by removing her from the picture entirely as in ultrasound imagery, speaking in her place as with the long history of male artists representing pregnant women in art, or emphasising an unattainable role for the maternal as with the predominance of the Virgin Mary as the iconic image of pregnancy. At the same time, these images reinforce the notion that pregnancy is to be treated as a period when a woman merely awaits the arrival of her child. To return to Mullin’s point, there is a tendency to consider pregnancies “solely in terms of whether or not they end in the birth of children,” without fully appreciating the significance this experience has on a woman’s life, whether a pregnancy is wanted or not.

64 Ibid., 9.
65 Mullin, “Pregnant Bodies, Pregnant Minds,” 40.
In the hands of some artists, including Kotak, von Eck, and Huckleberry, the corporeal transformations of pregnancy become the source of an aesthetic experience, art functions as a means of extending aesthetic appreciations of pregnancy from the intrasubjective relationship of a woman with her own body to the opening up intersubjective relations between the pregnant woman, and the fetus, and others to include others. Countering the alienation of pregnant subjects that Young describes, these artists place emphasis on the experience of pregnancy, drawing attention to the bodily changes that can be appreciated in their own right, as opposed to where they may lead. Performance art in particular, with its multi-sensory dimensions that commonly includes the presence of the artist, has an ability to suspend the boundaries between art and everyday life. Collapsing the dichotomies of subject and object in art along with that between art and reality, these artists open up presenting rich sites for these subjective aesthetic encounters to manifest while offering mothers-to-be opportunities to share the distinctive embodied and phenomenological characteristics of what it means to be pregnant.
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