MATERNAL BODIES

IN THE VISUAL ARTS

ROSEMARY BETTERTON

Maternal bodies in the visual arts

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Introduction: becoming maternal

When I say I am writing a book about the maternal body I get responses that range from interest to incomprehension, from enthusiasm to disgust, and I feel myself getting embarrassed. I need to clear the ground: 'It's not about mothering or natural birth or celebrity pregnancy ...' I stammer, and stop. Do I sound sufficiently objective? I am too close, still feeling uncomfortable, and I change the subject. I want to think about what produces this embarrassment and whether it can tell me anything about maternal bodies and their visibility, or lack of it. What kinds of attachment are involved in looking at maternal bodies in the visual arts? Why do they cause me (and others) to blush? Is it, as Louise Bourgeois suggests, that 'to reveal oneself is always embarrassing' (in Bernadac and Obrist 2000: 313), or is this affect more specific, tied to what is unrepresented about maternal bodies in visual culture?

My own interest in the maternal was born with my pregnancy at the age of forty, which surprised, enchanted and terrified me in equal parts and led to a radical transformation in my own identity and embodiment. I begin with this personal account because this experience framed my writing and has led to a continuing preoccupation with maternal bodies in the visual arts. As an art historian, I am interested in the power of visual imagery to frame our understanding of maternal bodies and to affirm or to disrupt prevailing maternal ideals. Neither singular nor universal, the maternal body is a symbolic construct with enormous cultural resonance, systematically shaped and produced through competing discourses and practices, yet at the same time curiously unacknowledged in terms of its visual history. The maternal body has a paradoxical status as both natural and exceptional, a sanctioned yet highly circumscribed form of female embodiment; like the nude, it is 'both a powerful cultural idea and a bodily state, but one which is unstable and open to multiple meanings' (Barcan 2004: 8). Maternal bodies are lived and imagined in many ways, so what is their significance within the visual arts?

In 1920 the Scottish artist Cecile Walton painted *Romance*, a self-portrait set in a domestic interior that depicts her lying on a bed holding up her newborn son, while her elder son looks on and a midwife bathes her feet (plate 1).[1] She shows herself as a modern independent woman, hair caught up in a turban and naked apart from a towel

round her hips, in an unadorned room with striped bed sheets and an angular table. But the painting also recalls an early Renaissance birth scene in its clarity and precise iconographical detail, making reference to Christian themes of the fall, redemption, immaculate birth and cleansing. These are represented symbolically by a single apple on a plate, a bunch of violets in a glass, oil in a bottle and a jug of clear water, the latter signifying virginal purity in fifteenth-century painting. An unnatural glow from the lower left illuminates Walton's body and shines on the faces of the baby Edward, the anonymous uniformed nurse, and her older son Gavril, who stands in profile like an enraptured attendant angel on the right of the picture. Only the baby turns towards the viewer, while Walton's face remains unlit as she inspects the doll-like infant in its robe, staring at it closely with an impersonal and faintly hostile gaze, seemingly curious about this new being. Behind her head in a dark doorway stands a shadowy masculine figure or perhaps it is his garments, cutting a sharp vertical line between mother and child. The whole scene is caught in an arrested moment in which time appears to stop still, while a translucent bubble and fallen rosebud and petals on the floorboards symbolise a fragile transience.

Romance caused a great stir in the second Edinburgh Group exhibition in 1920, and a contemporary critic who reviewed it commented on the 'frank treatment of an intimate subject', noting its 'quaintly primitive manner, suggestive of some earlier painter's "Nativity"' (quoted in Fowle 2002: 10).[2] In depicting modern motherhood according to a familiar artistic tradition, Walton consciously alluded to earlier maternal imagery as well as to her own position as a woman, an artist and a mother. The combination of matter of fact modernity with traditional iconography manifests detachment from the prevailing cult of motherhood and, together with the picture's ambiguous title, suggests that Walton has an ambivalent, even sceptical, attitude to maternity. A further jarring note to modern eyes is the black golliwog that the older child clasps casually in his arms against glowing skin and sheets, an image at the margins that marks this domestic idyll as white.[3] In some respects Walton typified the 'New Woman', a figure who had emerged in literature and art and had assumed a progressive image and dress style in the new century that was associated with sex reform and gender equality.[4] Walton enjoyed relative sexual and social freedom within the Edinburgh Group of avant-garde artists, which she joined in 1912, and together with fellow painters Eric Robertson and Dorothy Johnston formed 'an almost inseparable trio' (Cooper 1986: 178). She married Robertson and had two sons before separating from him in 1923 to bring up the children on her own. In this context the title *Romance* takes on an ironic twist; her husband's presence lurks behind her head and his landscape painting hangs on the wall, but this 'family romance' is marked by the father's physical absence. Nor is it evident that her 'romance' is with the new baby whom she scrutinises so intently. Walton later reflected on motherhood: 'Maternal concern has a longer view than that of rumpling the hair of a lover; nor is it quite satisfied by the multiplication of the family, but demands a share in the exaltation of intelligence' (quoted in Addison 2005).[5] Her own sharp intelligence is evident in her bitter comment on the role assigned to women

artists in her avant-garde circle: 'A girl who married onto their stage so to speak was expected to take her place in the drama. The script was put into her hand, perhaps Joyce's *Exiles*, perhaps *Sons and Lovers*. She was chosen. She was cast for a part. That she might have conceived of a play of her own was not considered' (quoted in Addison 2005). In 1926 Walton wrote an essay 'Atlanta in Caledonia' on women's role in the arts in Scotland, arguing that they should retain 'certain qualities and values of their own which play a subtle and peculiar part in our social life'. Women, she argued, should not surrender these 'in order to order to acquire those characteristics which are more peculiarly masculine', but be aware of their own 'intrinsic appeal of personality that has made women the equal of man' (quoted in Fowle 2002: 13).[6] Walton's insistence on gender equality while recognising the 'peculiar part' played by women's experience was a central strand in feminism of the time, but her visual exploration of these qualities in a birth scene was quite unique.[7]

I am left with a puzzle. *Romance* represents the modern predicament of a woman as an artist and mother, and yet looks back to precedents in earlier art. It is a painting of an intimate experience of the maternal body that was rarely represented, but its very oddness provokes further enquiry. This is an iconic narrative scene: a Renaissance holy image is fused with a modern home birth set in a domestic space occupied by a mother, midwife and children, and troubled by a masculine presence. Walton depicts the moment of recognition when a new sense of her own maternal subjectivity is born as the baby become other to herself, 'an alterity, if you like, she can call her own' (Baraitser 2009: 156). It represents the complex space-time of the maternal as a moment between time suspended and time passing, in which Lisa Baraitser suggests the experience of motherhood evokes, 'a renewed temporal awareness where the present was elongated and past and future no longer felt so tangible' (Baraitser 2009: 154).[8] Walton's *Romance* embodies the intertwining of maternal space and time, self and other, mother and artist, as well as of the secular and the religious, independence and confinement that characterise maternal imagery. It is this complex moment of the mother's encounter with the maternal that I want to explore further in this book.

Embodying the maternal

Motherhood has been the recurrent theme in western art traditions, personified in the figure of the Virgin Mary, but my interest is both narrower and more encompassing: an investigation of maternal embodiment as the process of becoming a maternal subject. Baraitser suggests 'the almost intractable difficulties with separating the maternal subject from the pregnant body', but this is precisely my starting point (Baraitser 2009: 15). I want to explore a relationship between the maternal and pregnant body that treats them as neither identical nor discontinuous. It seems necessary therefore to begin by making a distinction, analytically at least, between the pregnant and the post-partum body, because not every pregnant body becomes a maternal one or leads to birth. The realities of infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth and abortion require a separation to be

made between the state of pregnancy and that of motherhood. Maternal bodies may also not only be those of birth mothers: women (and some men) take on maternal identities through many forms of kinship and social mothering, adoption and surrogacy. Assisted reproductive technologies and embryo implantation have opened up a different potential for maternity that, like paternity, has become legally and biologically uncertain. The UK Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act defines a mother as: 'The woman who is carrying or has carried a child as a result of placing in her of an embryo or of sperm and eggs, and no other woman, is to be treated as the mother of the child' (HFEA 2008 Section 33).[9] I use the term 'maternal' in a more inclusive way in this book, but at times I want to distinguish between pregnancy as a voluntary or involuntary embodied process that may or may not result in a birth, and wider cultural representations of social and prosthetic mothers of different sexualities, genders, ethnicities, ages and capacities. What kinds of representational practices bring some maternal bodies into visibility and disallow others? Can our encounter with such bodies in the visual arts tell us anything about the condition of becoming maternal?

Simultaneously one and two, intimate and public, hidden and on display, the maternal body occupies a site of multiple attachments and investments for the individual and for her wider community. As a process that occurs within a woman's body, pregnancy is structurally located in the personal and private sphere, but it is always also public property. Even total strangers feel able to comment on and touch her pregnant belly: 'Suddenly my body's not my own. Everyone's got a say in it – not a bad thing, I quite like it'.[10] The maternal body is constructed as a site for regulation and control through medical practices and reproductive technologies, the welfare system, maternity law and safety legislation. It is subject to medical and legal constraint and social surveillance, as well as signified and signifying through cultural texts and discursive practices. The pregnant woman is also situated between various interests in her potential child by partners, family and friends.

In European visual traditions the maternal body is conceptualised as a container for the unborn child, either as the sacred vessel of divinity enshrined in the Christian maternal ideal or in the biomedical construction of the pregnant body as a receptacle for embryonic life. As knowledge shifted from a model of generation to one of reproduction, a religious understanding of birth was supplanted by a scientific one, and imagery drawn from imagination or nature replaced by morbid anatomical illustration. The maternal body came to be seen as a mechanism and the figuration of the monstrous maternal emerged as its uncanny double. This imagery was in turn displaced as the maternal womb was rendered transparent by new imaging technologies in the twentieth century. Maternal bodies have been continuously visible in these various guises and were produced in various modes and sites: in Christian icons of the Virgin; anatomical illustrations in Renaissance and Enlightenment science; monstrous imagery from early popular culture, and in works by artists across the centuries.

My aim in this book is to demonstrate the power of the visual in shaping our cultural imaginary of maternal bodies, as well as to explore ways in which particular

maternal paradigms have been disrupted and transformed. Tracking the historical interaction between maternal ideals and pregnant bodies offers a starting point from which to interrogate prevailing images of the maternal and its material and psychic embodiments.

But however the maternal may be viewed, 'we do not *just* blindly configure ourselves around our internal ideals, and nor are we purely held in the sway of external representations of idealized motherhood' (Baraitser 2009: 94). Disjunctions occur within maternal representation that expose those ideals and produce fissures in them; these can, in Judith Butler's terms, become 'an enabling disruption' to the norm. While Butler is uninterested in the maternal, her argument that norms both stabilise gendered identities and produce their opposites as 'unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies', is useful here (Butler 1993: xi). I seek to demonstrate that, while maternal ideals are sanctified and legitimated, some pregnant bodies remain indisciplined and pathologised, seen in need of cultural sanction and social intervention.

Maternal bodies continue to be reframed visually in early twenty-first-century culture. Once confined, pregnant women appear everywhere: flaunted in celebrity magazines, courted as consumers and consulted on the internet, but only some maternal bodies are accorded the privilege of representation in public space. It is young, white, able-bodied and heterosexual pregnant bodies that normally make it into visibility, except when marked as deviant in the form of teenage, addicted, disabled, multiple, post-menopausal or transgendered mothers. My interest in exploring the relationship between these framings and embodied maternal materialities is not to discover a hidden reality behind representation, but rather to investigate the practices by which the maternal *becomes embodied* in the visual. I look at images and concepts of maternal embodiment that are constituted in diverse historical, cultural and political formations: flesh that is imbued with sociality.

Maternal subjects: speaking, writing and making

> Nor, in pregnancy, did I experience the embryo as decisively internal ... but rather, as something inside and out of me, yet becoming hourly and daily more separate, on its way to becoming separate from me and of-itself. In early pregnancy the stirring of the fetus felt like ghostly tremors of my own body, later like movements of a being imprisoned in me; but both sensations were *my* sensations, contributing to my own sense of physical and psychic space.
>
> (Rich 1986: 63)

Adrienne Rich's nuanced description of her own pregnancy suggests a complexity of experience, but the language of pregnancy, like that of birth, is usually full of metaphor and euphemism. In English women 'fall pregnant', they have a 'bun in the oven', are 'knocked up', 'up the duff' and 'expectant' mothers await their 'confinement'.[11] In

Margaret Atwood's story 'Giving Birth', the protagonist muses on the inadequacy of the terms 'giving birth' and 'delivery': who 'gives' and 'who' is delivered? Atwood's point is that there are no words for such indescribable events in women's bodies: 'Thus language, muttering in its archaic tongues of something, yet one more thing, that needs to be re-named' (Atwood 1998: 225).[12] Rich's classic text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) was the first major feminist analysis of motherhood, and yet she too struggled to give words to the embodied experience of becoming maternal as, 'something inside and out of me'. In a study of women's writing on childbirth in the twentieth century, Tess Cosslett identifies opposing medical and natural birth ideologies that shaped women's experience of maternity and marginalised earlier women's oral traditions, which came to be seen as 'unstructured, ghoulish horror stories' (Cosslett 1994: 4). But, if individual women came to be seen as either passive actors or active agents in a tussle between obligation and autonomy, 'the body itself, the physical conditions of maternity, challenges all our cultural scripts, and resists a unifying definition' (Cosslett 1994: 5). Women's voices speaking about their own maternal experiences emerged strongly in fiction and life-writing at the end of the last century and have now become clamorous, thanks in part to the internet, which raises the question of whose stories are told and how. No longer silenced or absent, women's maternal voices are multiple and fragmented according to Della Pollock, who defines her own account of childbirth narratives as 'a *partial* account of a partial performative culture' (D. Pollock 1999: 22). It is beyond the scope of this book to engage with the material lives of pregnant and maternal women; others have given powerful accounts of these experiences.[13] My focus is different. I argue that, while maternal and pregnant bodies have been powerfully shaped by visual culture, practices by women artists offer a means of re-imagining maternal bodies in ways that value them differently, but that this is not an easy process, nor are precedents readily to hand. As Elizabeth MacKenzie writes: 'Much of the work I produce represents the ambivalence I experience in relation to ideas and images of what I am *supposed* to be ... I want to be a good artist. I want to be a good mother, but how I function in these roles rarely matches the cultural narratives and expectations I encounter' (MacKenzie 2012: unpaginated).

For many women who practice art, become pregnant and give birth, often the most powerful and transforming experience of their lives is still routinely dismissed by critics, curators and tutors as sentimental or irrelevant to contemporary art practice. This can produce a split between their artistic and maternal selves in practical and psychological terms: 'There is a conflict between my identity as a mother and my identity as an artist, both in the fight for time and space in which to work and in the powerful feelings of guilt that arise' (Clare Jarrett in Lincolnshire County Council 1993: 27). Women as mothers are discouraged from putting their art before their children; women as artists are inhibited from including maternal experience within their work. A small number of art exhibitions in the UK and USA have been devoted to themes of motherhood and fertility; however, it remains a tricky subject in the art world. When the artist-curator Helen Knowles approached galleries to show the

exhibition *Birth Rites* she commented, 'what we're finding is that there is still a lot of fear around the subject matter' (quoted in Moorhead 2008: 17).[14] Visual artists have explored maternal embodiment through a range of strategies in recent art practice, and these provide specific case studies as a counterpoint to historical analysis in this book. Taking as my starting point representations of maternal and birthing bodies mainly but not exclusively made by women artists, I propose that these offer a site of reconfiguration. Emphasising the heterogeneity and specificity of maternally embodied artworks, I also argue that becoming maternal is often represented as an *unfamiliar* rather than as a natural state from the perspective of maternal subjects. Many of these artists depict pregnancy and motherhood as a discontinuity that ruptures their feminine identities and renders these strange. Such alternative visual genealogies show how it is possible to trouble the maternal ideal and reveal what it works so strenuously to deny: the agency and potential power of women as maternal subjects.

Each chapter in the book is framed around readings of particular artworks that open up maternal embodiment as a space for investigation. At its heart is a crucial question: what does it mean to employ art as a means of thinking through, rather than just thinking about the maternal? My method of working performs repetitions and returns to key artworks, for example, Marc Quinn's portrait of Alison Lapper, which acts as a fulcrum for thinking about maternal space in Chapter 1.[15] Works of art are the bases from which I begin to explore conceptual analogies and draw out historical and thematic connections. To return repeatedly to certain works produces readings that are open and layered rather than finite and closed, subject to transformation in a continuing embodied and critical encounter with the work, the artist, and other writers. Art practices speak to and engage with theories in many ways in a form of 'thinking through touching and making' as Marina Warner puts it (Warner 2004: 11). One theme of this book is that art practices can also anticipate the slower working out of theory, for example, Bobby Baker's staged domestic performances materially prefigured Butler's theory of drag, while Alice Neel's paintings of pregnant women can be seen as precursors to Iris Marion Walker's phenomenological account of pregnant embodiment. Art offers carnal knowledge: an embodied and psychic understanding of how representational practices interact with experiences of the maternal body. As Marsha Meskimmon succinctly puts it, 'the *work* of art is the work of embodiment, of bringing us to our senses in cognition' (Meskimmon 2003a: 5). Nor is thinking merely after the event; as I fumble for words to describe something seen and experienced I re-enact a partial embodied encounter with the work itself. Meanings emerge in the practice of writing; thinking through art is a knowing encounter that itself can make a difference.

A different way of seeing and thinking produces particular understandings of the world and of us as subjects and objects within it: 'The image is ... the result of an act of perception and construction which frames a world and the embodied beings within that world' (Featherstone and Wernick 1995: 4). Ways of seeing can be individual, arbitrary, idiosyncratic, ideological, institutional or collective, and are constructed