notes on reading the *post-partum document*
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**THE DISCOURSE OF THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT**

The *Post-Partum Document* is located within the theoretical and political practice of the women's movement, a practice which foregrounds the issues of subjectivity and ideological oppression. More specifically, the *Document* is identified with the tendency that bases the notion of ideological oppression on a psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity, that is, the unconscious.¹ Freud's discovery of the unconscious had crucial implications for theorizing the process by which human subjects become constituted in ideology. If there is no ideology except in practice and by a subject, then ideological oppression is not merely false consciousness. The ideological refers not only to systems of representation but also to a nonunitary complex of social practices which have political consequences. Moreover, these consequences are not given as the direct effect of the means of signification employed in a practice. They depend on a political analysis of what is signified.²

For the purposes of such an analysis, the *Post-Partum Document* is the product of a practice of signification, and as such, it does not reflect but reworks the feminist ideology in which
it was founded. This is primarily the ideology of consciousness-raising groups that still form a major part of the women’s movement. The Document reiterates, at one level, the unique contribution that consciousness-raising made to political practice in general by emphasizing the subjective moment of women’s oppression. But, at another level, it argues against the supposed self-sufficiency of lived experience and for a theoretical elaboration of the social relations in which femininity is formed. In this sense, the Post-Partum Document functions as part of an ongoing debate over the relevance of psychoanalysis to the theory and practice of both Marxism and feminism. Furthermore, the debate includes a critique of the patriarchal bias underlying some of the theoretical assumptions on which the Document is based.

THE DISCOURSE OF THE MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The Post-Partum Document describes the subjective moment of the mother-child relationship. An analysis of this relationship is crucial to an understanding of the way in which ideology functions in/by the material practices of childbirth and child care. Feeding or dressing a child depends as much on the interchange of a system of signs as teaching him/her to speak or write. In a sense, even the unconscious discourse of these moments is “structured like a language.” This underlines the fact that intersubjective relationships are fundamentally social. More precisely, every social practice offers a specific expression of a general social law and this law is the symbolic dimension which is given in language.

In patriarchy, the phallus becomes the privileged signifier of this symbolic dimension. Although the subject is constituted in a relation of “lack” at the moment of his/her entry into language, it is possible to speak specifically of the woman’s “negative place” in the general process of significations or social practices that reproduce patriarchal relations within a given social formation. In childbirth, the mother’s negative place is misrecognized insofar as the child is the phallus for her. This imaginary relation is lived through, at the level of ideology and in the social practice of child care, as proof of the natural capacity for maternity and the inevitability of the sexual division of labor.

The documentations of specific moments such as weaning from the breast, learning to speak, and entering a nursery demonstrate the reciprocity of the process of socialization, that is, the intersubjective discourse through which not only the child but also the mother is constituted as subject.
THE DISCOURSE OF WOMEN’S PRACTICE IN ART

The *Post-Partum Document* forms part of the “problematic” of women’s practice in art. The problematic includes a symptomatic reading of the visual inscriptions of women artists. Such a reading, based as much on absences as presences, suggest the way in which the realm of “the feminine” is bounded by negative signification in the order of language and culture. Because of this coincidence of language and patriarchy, the feminine is, metaphorically, set on the side of the heterogeneous, the unnamable, the unsaid. But the radical potential of women’s art practice lies precisely in this coincidence, since, insofar as the feminine is said, it is profoundly subversive.¹⁰

However, the *Post-Partum Document* is not an excavation of female culture, or a valorization of the female body or of feminine experience as such; it is an attempt to articulate the feminine as discourse, and therefore places the emphasis on the intersubjective relationships which constitute the female subject.¹¹ Currently in women’s art practice, there is a proliferation of forms of signification where the artist’s own person, in particular her body, is given as a signifier, that is, as object. In the *Document*, as a means of distantiation, the figure of the mother is not visibly present. Although it is a self-documentation of the mother-child relationship, here between myself and my son, the *Post-Partum Document* does not describe the unified, transcendental subject of autobiography, but rather, the decentered, socially constituted subject of a mutual discourse. Moreover, this subject is fundamentally divided. There is a conscious/unconscious split which has operations characteristic of both sides: the signifying processes or drives on the one hand, and the social constraints such as family structures or modes of production on the other.¹² The means of signification used in the *Document* are scriptovisual in order to articulate the gap left by this split, that is, to show how the unconscious processes irrupt into a signifying practice and cut across the systematic order of language and, also, to show the difficulty of the symbolic order for women.

In the *Post-Partum Document*, the art objects are used as fetish objects, explicitly to displace the potential fetishization of the child and implicitly to expose the typically fetishistic function of representation.¹³ The stained liners, folded vests, child’s markings, and word imprints have a minimum sign value in relation to the commodity status of representational art, but they have a maximum affective value in relation to the libidinal economy of the unconscious. They are “representations,” in the psychoanalytic sense, of the cath ected memory traces.¹⁴ These traces, in combination with the diaries, speech events, and feeding charts, construct the discourse of the mother’s lived experience. At the same time, they are set up in an
antagonistic relationship with the diagrams, algorithms, and footnotes which construct the discourse of feminist analysis. In the context of an installation, this analysis is not meant to definitively theorize the *Post-Partum* moment, but rather to describe a process of secondary revision. In a sense, this text is also included in that process not as a topology of intention, but as a rewriting of the discourse of the *Document* which is at once a repression and a reactivation of its consequences.

**NOTES**

1. The *Post-Partum Document* is most closely associated with the debate that surfaced after the publication in 1974 of Juliet Mitchell’s book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, and in particular with a Lacanian reading of Freud, which was in strong evidence as a theoretical tendency at the Patriarchy Conference in London in May 1976. A seminar entitled Psychoanalysis and Feminism was organized during the showing of the *Post-Partum Document* at the ICA New Gallery in October 1976. The relevance of psychoanalysis to ideology, feminine psychology, and art practice was discussed by a panel on which I was a participant along with Parveen Adams, lecturer in psychology, Brunel University; Susan Lipshitz, psychologist, The Tavistock; filmmaker Laura Mulvey; and writer Rosalind Delmar.


8. Misrecognition here refers specifically to Lacan’s sense of the term as in “the function of misrecognition which characterizes the ego in all its structures,” and not to ideological “misrec-


14. J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of the Self* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 200. For Freud, the idea/presentation/representation is to be understood as what comes from the object and is registered in mnemonic systems, and not as the act of presenting an object to consciousness; ibid., p. 247, memory trace/mnemonic trace is used by Freud to denote the way in which events are inscribed upon the memory, they are deposited in different systems and reactivated only once they have been cathected; ibid., p. 62, catheisis is an economic concept pertaining to the fact that a certain amount of psychical energy is attached to an idea or group of ideas, a part of the body, or an object.

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