

The “Birth” of Photography: *Carmen Winant and the Virtual Feminist Museum*

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Introduction

In 2007, the feminist scholar Griselda Pollock introduced the concept of the Virtual Feminist Museum (VFM)—a feminist-psychoanalytic theory that uses the museum space to examine the forces that shape the discipline of art history and its political, gendered unconscious. Pollock belongs to a generation of feminists who came of age in the 1970s, a decade flooded with photography; once the politics of the female body came to include the politics of its representation in visual images, a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of the phallogocentric unconscious was needed, prompting a wider engagement with psychoanalysis. There was no expectation that Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis would provide easy answers to the role that images played in controlling women’s lives and suppressing their potential, but what it did supply was a vocabulary through which the social, cultural, and pictorial phallogocentric unconscious could be addressed.¹

The phallogocentrism that governs arts institutions has since caught up with and adapted to the most central demand made by second wave feminists of the 1970s: the inclusion of women. Countless institutions now fill their galleries to capacity with women’s art of the last sixty years, organized around no particular theme other than the gender of the artists.² The Virtual Feminist Museum seeks to provide an alternative to these half-hearted concessions. Rather than simply acknowledge the exploitation of women, the VFM is an institution willing to expose, intervene in, and renegotiate the very conditions of production that have made such corrections necessary. The VFM sees the museum space as a Foucauldian institution that is both governed by and actively transforms the structures, protocols, and norms of the larger phallogocentric cultural fabric to which it belongs; as a politically charged institution that has historically

¹ Griselda Pollock and Laura Mulvey, “Laura Mulvey in Conversation with Griselda Pollock,” *Studies in the Maternal* 2, no. 1 (January 2010): 3.

² A recent example is “60 Years” at the Tate Modern, London.

censored the female body, it must therefore be the birthplace of its reintroduction into the world. Pollock's theory proposes how to use the tools of the museum for this task: the museum as Institution, the encounter with and between art objects, the circulation of the photomechanically reproduced image, and the act of re-assembling the archive.

In March 2018, the artist Carmen Winant installed *My Birth* at the Museum of Modern Art: an installation of over two thousand found photographs of women in all stages of childbirth, sourced from feminist reproductive literature of the 1970s and '80s (**fig.1-3**). Occupying the entirety of two walls in a twenty-five-foot corridor, the installation was part of *Being*, the theme of that year's biannual new photography show. The maternal body, particularly in the early stages of pregnancy and birth, has notoriously been censored from both the art museum (for being too graphic? Too private? Too much of a "woman's issue?") as well as from feminist scholarship that hoped to distance itself from women's relegation to the status of reproductive vessel and domestic servant. The art world's sexist economy, which replaced lived maternal experience with an idealized Madonna and Child prototype, coupled with the decades-long taboo of being a feminist mother, severed lived maternal experience from its representation, devalued maternal labor, robbed mothers of maternal subjectivity, enabled systems of control over her body, and set up cultural expectations that only further bound her to the domestic, irrational confines of sexual difference. These are the stakes that Winant brings to the negotiating table in her installation.

In this paper, I will use *My Birth* to test the applicability and limitations of Pollock's Virtual Feminist Museum. I will argue that *My Birth* is a sort of VFM prototype that uses the tools of the art museum—the Institution, the encounter, the photomechanically reproduced image, and assembling the archive—to reintroduce a body that has been mostly erased from the public domain, its cultural institutions, and even from feminism itself. Winant's installation embodies one of the central tenets of Pollock's proposal for a feminist future: not simply to include women, but to arrive at an understanding of the forces that have thus far excluded her.

The VFM uses the tools of the museum in the hopes of uncovering the unconscious conditions that govern these cultural systems of exclusion. I will therefore use Winant's installation to test the theories proposed by the feminist-psychoanalyst

Elissa Marder in her book *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Marder argues that the camera is a mechanical mother, capable of reproduction, birthing the subject, and shaping the subject through repetition. Marder describes how photography invokes Freudian anxieties over “missing” our own births and Lacan’s theory on the absence of language in the pre-Oedipal state, to justify the erasure of the mother that Winant seeks to restore.

I. Conscious Expressions

The Institution—What is most obvious about the VFM is that it sees the museum as a model institution in which to establish a feminist logic. It is a “historically, ideologically, and discursive center for production and dissemination of both cultural knowledge and knowledge of the visual arts as part of that larger if ever inconsistent script about subjectivities, genders, classes, ethnicities, sexualities, abilities.”³ As an institution that tries to show a particular arc of history through carefully collected, selected and arranged objects, it cannot be neutral, and is inherently political, governed by outside social and cultural rules that dictate what can and cannot be exhibited or said.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, Michel Foucault explains that every society has rules of controlling, selecting, organizing, and redistributing certain kinds of discourse, while excluding others, particularly that which concerns politics and sexuality. These rules are perpetuated by the Institution, where discourse is controlled via “principles of classification, ordering and distribution.”⁴ It is easy to see this in the art museum, which has traditionally thought in strict categories of nations, schools, periods, media, styles and masters. The Institution’s control of discourse then produces *commentary*: “major narratives, told, retold and varied; formulae, texts, ritualized texts” that shapes disciplines. These are the seemingly self-contained “-isms” that have structured the phallogentric art museum. To change discourse, you must change the discipline that produces it. To change discipline, you must work within the Institution that perpetuates it. So if “woman has always functioned

³ Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007), 18.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 220.

‘within’ the discourse of man,” writes the feminist Hélène Cixous, “it is time for her to dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers...”⁵ Interventions that bring about such change are possible, writes Foucault, because inherently, “[f]or a discipline to exist, there must be the possibility of formulating—and of doing so ad infinitum—fresh propositions.”⁶

Carmen Winant was certainly not the first feminist artist to show work about motherhood in a prominent institution. Motherhood has been a major subject of feminist scholarship, artistic practice, and exhibitions for nearly two decades.⁷ Winant’s “fresh proposition,” however, is her inclusion of photographs of birth—images that have traditionally been confined to medical and reproductive texts. Those scarce representations of birth that *have* been permitted to exist in the art world—for instance, in the paintings of Frida Kahlo and Alice Neel (**fig. 4-5**)—refuse to depict the face of the mother; this then contributes to the larger issue of erasing maternal subjectivity (I will return to this later) and devaluing women’s physical and psychological labor in bringing life into the world.⁸ The stakes of the mother’s overwhelming censorship from the Institution were summed up by Carol Stabile, who wrote that the disappearance of the pregnant or birthing mother “renders female and male contributions to reproduction equivalent.”⁹ Erasing the image of the mother’s body negates her nine months of labor and permits masculine control over it: “further credibility is given to the ‘rights’ of men not only in the decision to terminate a pregnancy, but in areas of child support and custody as well.”¹⁰

The significance of *My Birth* being installed at MoMA goes beyond the museum’s name recognition, which bestows upon it the status of a wide-reaching and influential Institution with a capital “I.” For a year later, the museum closed to the public to complete an overhauling reconceptualization of the modern art museum. The “new

⁵ Hélène Cixous and Keith Cohen, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 887.

⁶ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 223.

⁷ Roksana Badruddoja and Maki Motapanyane, *New Maternalisms: Tales of Motherwork (Dislodging the Unthinkable)*, (Ontario: Demeter Press, 2016), 1.

⁸ Carmen Winant, “The Art of Birth,” *Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles*, July 21, 2016, <https://contemporaryartreview.la/the-art-of-birth/>

⁹ Carol A. Stabile, “Shooting the Mother: Fetal Photography and the Politics of Disappearance,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 10 (January 1992): 196.

¹⁰ Stabile, “Shooting the Mother,” 196.

MoMA” edges toward Pollock’s vision of an “open laboratory” that replaces the traditional, linear history of art, governed by “-isms” with a more complex, atemporal set of “networks and transformative interactions between the images differently assembled in conversations framed by feminist analysis and theory.”¹¹ The Museum of Modern Art realigned to the contemporary issues of the moment rather than those pertaining exclusively to the history of art. The fact that two-thousand photographs of childbirth made their way into its harrowed halls—unthinkable a decade ago—suggests the art world is beginning to take a major step toward the feminist thinking espoused by the VFM, a thinking that would eventually seep into public discourse. The images comprising *My Birth* were indeed reproduced and discussed in publications like *Vogue* and *The Guardian*, thus extending the conversation of the mother’s censorship into the mainstream. It is no coincidence that the following year, Heji Shin’s close-up photographs of crowning heads were part of the Whitney Biennial.

The Encounter—The VFM, writes Pollock, “uses the most interesting aspect of the Museum: the *encounter* between and with artworks [to] ask questions of the *unknown* history of women at moments of cultural radicalism and cultural trauma.”¹² If the Institution is where this change must occur, then it is the encounter with previously invisible, repressed images that will enable us to begin “differencing the canon” in a feminist direction within the Institution and beyond.¹³ Here we must consider two questions: why have we not encountered a museum that operates according to a feminist logic thus far, necessitating the VFM theory in the first place? And what is different about the encounter that Winant sets up in *My Birth*?

The political climate at the time of Pollock’s writing in 2007 propagated the notion that one was living in a postfeminist world, that feminism was something from the past, a finished project, unfashionable, unnecessary. Feminist women were “rejected as irrelevant dinosaurs of a past age,” an indication, writes Pollock, of “some seriously unfinished business.”¹⁴ In this climate, it is easy to see how arts institutions—which

¹¹ Ibid 11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pollock, *Encounters*, 13.

already fall on the politically progressive side of the spectrum—could see that their work was complete. If the history of women at moments of radical change was perceived to be already *known*, then there was nothing new left to encounter.

But we have also not encountered the mother in the art museum because feminism itself has tended to exclude her. The mother figure occupied an uncertain place in feminism of the 1960s and '70s, writes Andrea Liss; she “remained a silent outcast for many feminists who strategically needed to distance themselves from all that was culturally coded as passive, weak, and irrational.”¹⁵ Many feminists of the 1990s continued to view pregnancy and motherhood as the ultimate act of complicity, writes Carol Stabile, a barbaric act that locks “women into institutional and psychological structures of dependency and powerlessness.”¹⁶ The entrance into the new millennium saw much criticism of photographer-mothers who used their own children as subjects, and in the Trump Era, when abortion politics are as heated as ever, and “fetal personhood” continues to discount the voice of the mother, many feminists continue to “throw the baby out of the bathwater,” says Winant in an interview with the author.¹⁷ In an artist talk at UCLA, she begged the question: for whom is such feminism intended? Some feminists’ notion that the liberated woman is a childless employee of the capitalist state excludes the many non-white and working-class women that were already at work and suggests that the labor involved in childbirth and motherwork is not serious.¹⁸ The feminist prohibition of encountering the maternal body reciprocated, if unintentionally, the patriarchal gaze that already censored it from the museum space. The unknown history of women at moments of cultural radicalism that Pollock asks for must therefore be a history of the mother.

As Hélène Cixous asserted, “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time;” in order to write herself into her own history, woman must “return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her.”¹⁹ She must create and ensure an encounter with that body to become visible. In his essay “Modernizing

¹⁵ Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009,) xv.

¹⁶ Stabile, “Shooting the Mother,” 193.

¹⁷ Interview with the author, March 12, 2020.

¹⁸ Carmen Winant, “Carmen Winant: UCLA Department of Art Lecture,” Artist talk, Hammer Museum, May 23, 2019.

¹⁹Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 880.

Vision,” Jonathan Crary also argues that new visions must begin with the human body. Not insignificantly, as this paper will soon address, he invokes the medium of photography, reminding us of how the camera obscura as a model for human vision collapsed in the 1840s, and was replaced with Goethe’s concept of the body as producer of subjective vision and new knowledge. To modernize vision, we must turn to the body. To make it a feminist vision, that body must belong to a woman.

The encounter that Winant sets up is explosive, staggering, agonizing, insistent, and physically straining to go through. Shepherding viewers through a narrow space that Winant herself admits resembles a birth canal, the installation demands to be seen, to be felt, to be experienced.²⁰ One encounters the two-thousand photographs of childbirth by moving through this metaphorical maternal body formed up of a narrow, enclosed space through which one must pass. The encounter quickly becomes an uncanny one: when such images are repeated over and over again, one realizes just how absent they are from everyday culture and consciousness. The erroneous belief that childbirth is already visible, even trivial or ordinary, paradoxically renders it—and the maternal body—invisible, veiled, monstrous. Passing through *My Birth*, we are literally reborn with new (feminist) vision with which to see this body. Of course, we must remember that we are not dealing with original images here, but ones that have been encountered again and again over forty years by means of the books in which they first appeared. Let us then turn to a third tool that Pollock asks us to mobilize: the photomechanically reproduced image.

The Photomechanically Reproduced Image—If the Institution perpetuates certain kinds of discourse that the encounter wishes to disrupt, then it can only do so by publicly acknowledging how the repetition of certain kinds of images has shaped discourse, and therefore subjects, over time. To this end, the Virtual Feminist Museum takes as its point of origin Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne* or Memory Atlas (it is worth mentioning that *Mnemosyne* was the *mother* of all muses in ancient Greece.)²¹ In the 1920s, the art historian assembled nearly a thousand silver gelatin reproductions of artworks from across time periods and geographies, and placed them into over seventy

²⁰ Winant Vogue

²¹ Pollock, *Encounters*, 18.

groups according to recurring patterns, gestures and forms.²² The persistence and survival of particular images revealed to Warburg certain longstanding memory banks of culture that simultaneously represented a past and continued to inform the present through their continuous reproduction. Displacing a sequential model of history with one whose logic seeks to trace the migration and repetition of images pointed “to the function of collective memory as a formative force for the emergence of styles.”²³ Unlike a chronological art history, which bears connotations of an inevitable teleological continuity that cannot be interrupted, the *Mnemosyne* makes clear where a feminist intervention might be possible, based on what inclusions and exclusions it uncovers.

It is not a coincidence that Pollock opens her essay on the VFM with an anecdote about a time she came across a set of postcards in a museum shop depicting an idealized female nude. The encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum are not limited to interactions with physical objects in the Institution itself, but include “the extended museum setting that leaks beyond the confines of the gallery” by means of photographic reproduction.²⁴

The medium of photography has long enabled the sort of linear thinking that the VFM wishes to do away with. “The proliferation of photography, halftone printing, and slide projection by the turn of the twentieth century [encouraged] the sense that all of these components had seamlessly fused,” writes Molly Kalkstein, “producing a linear, apparently self-explanatory timeline of art history.”²⁵ In regards to the image of the mother that *My Birth* wishes to counter, we must acknowledge how photographic reproductions perpetuate the image of the Virgin Mary as an impossible idealization of the maternal. This unrealistic expectation divine composure, repeated in every medium and across generations and geographies, was widely disseminated when photographic technologies allowed. It inevitably entered the history of photography itself, when it was picked up by Pictorialists in the late-nineteenth/early twentieth centuries and celebrity mother/child editorial portraits in the twenty-first.²⁶

²² Scholars have not yet deciphered the logic that governs certain groups.

²³ Molly Kalkstein, “Aby Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas: On Photography, Archives, and the Afterlife of Images,” *Rutgers Art Review: The Journal of Graduate Research in Art History* 35 (2019): 50.

²⁴ Pollock, *Encounters*, 9.

²⁵ Kalkstein, “Mnemosyne Atlas,” 58.

²⁶ Susan Bright, *Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood*, (London: Art Books Publishing, 2013), 12.

The image of the mother that made its way into the phallogocentric Institution, by means of reproduction in literature, magazines, and the internet, prohibited the articulation of the complexity of real-life mothering. “Maternal ambivalence, postnatal depression, loss of status, and financial independence,” writes Eti Wade, “are all aspects of maternal experience effectively repressed and silenced by the pervasive Madonna and Child idealized form.”²⁷ Wade argues that what we need are “new maternalist aesthetic forms:” alternative visual languages that use photography’s ability to mirror the mother’s own reproductive capacity in order to represent maternal subjectivity and resist or subvert traditional idealized forms of the “all-giving, all-sacrificing mother, who negates herself in deference to her child’s every need.”²⁸

Winant’s installation features photographs originally published in feminist reproductive literature that aimed to achieve this very task by decensoring the female body. Sourced from texts with titles like *The Politics of Home Birth* and *Home Birth: Shared Knowledge*, they were a form of power-sharing and access that restored maternal subjectivity through the photomechanically reproduced image. They show real women who bleed, whose bodies change, who are fierce but vulnerable, stripped of any romantic connotations. They are beautiful, like the Madonna we are used to seeing, but they are also shocking, and show the early stages of motherhood to be a terrifying and primal experience.²⁹ Through them, women gained access to photographs of their bodies in labor, identified with them, and could try to better understand and prepare for motherhood.

When encountered in overwhelming quantity across MoMA’s walls, they also reveal who has been left out of the narrative across the decades (the basis of “norms”): women of color, homosexual couples, and non-vaginal births. Found images are “primary, haptic, tangible, distressed and distressable objects...touched and imprinted by many hands,” says Winant, passed in and out of lives, specific lives, often women’s

²⁷ Eti Wade, “Maternal Art Practices: In Support of New Maternalist Aesthetic Forms,” in *New Maternalisms: Tales of Motherwork (Dislodging the Unthinkable)*, ed. Badruddoja, Roksana and Maki Motapanyane. (Ontario: Demeter Press, 2016,) 282.

²⁸ Wade, “Maternal Art Practices,” 274.

²⁹ Bright, *Home Truths*, 16.

lives, and with particular purposes.³⁰ Removed from the context of a literature that has largely existed on the fringes of culture, she places these photographs within an Institution that disseminates them to wider audiences, to be touched and imprinted by new hands. Winant's installation does not simply make up for the absence of images of childbirth by including them in the museum. Rather, by using found images reproduced in texts, she probes the mechanisms of knowledge production, its circulation, and social impact to meet the VFM's goal of working with- and adding to- society's pre-existing "memory bank of images." Through Winant's powerful encounter, feminist questions surrounding sexuality, sexual difference, and the representation of the mother's body enter the status of permissible discourse. A different photomechanical reproduction will inevitably follow, as photographs of the installation make their way into exhibition catalogues, books (including a book version of the installation), magazines, websites, and the social internet, fulfilling the VFM's focus on changing the mechanisms of discourse through the museum space.

Reassembling the Archive—We have already discussed how the Institution that shapes discourse must be the birthplace of new encounters, which rely on photomechanically reproduced images to understand and render visible conscious systems of exclusion. If an image has seen years, or decades of reproduction and circulation, and had powerful effects on constructing the subject, then it must have an afterlife. The archive is the plane that hosts this afterlife. A Virtual Feminist Museum attempts to de-fetishize the archive by exposing its politics. The archive "is pre-selected in ways that reflect what each culture considered worth storing and remembering," explains Pollock, thus "skewing the historical record and indeed historical writing towards the privileged, the powerful, the political...vast areas of social life and huge numbers of people hardly exist, according to the archive."³¹ Therefore, she suggests, we must use the museum practice of assembling images from an archive as a method of discovering what we do not yet know about ourselves, and the psychological

³⁰ Carmen Winant, UCLA Department of Art Lecture (artist talk, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, California, May 23, 2019), Web. Date accessed: March 2, 2020.

³¹ Pollock, *Encounters*, 12.

processes around memory, persistence, repetition, and return. Working within the archive, feminist thought does not attempt to displace the results of the past, but to operate within it, tracking across a series of images something deeper and recurrent.³²

This is precisely what Winant does in *My Birth*. When she pulls images from an archive—albeit one that is already feminist—she treats the pictures she finds as original objects.³³ In other words, the literary archive in which these photographs survive, as well as the new archive she inevitably creates by allowing art museums to acquire the work, becomes the subject of the work. By cutting them out of their original contexts, and pasting them alongside two thousand images on a wall in the Museum of Modern Art, she engages in a reassembly that demonstrates not only the longstanding erasure of the mother from the phallogocentric archive, but also how motherhood actually enhances and contributes to women’s art practices, and deserves greater space in the archive of a Virtual Feminist Museum.

II. Unconscious Conditions

What made photography such a rich topic for psychoanalysis in the postmodernism of the 1970s was the same thing that interested art historians: the construction of the subject through the photographic image.³⁴ Scholars began writing on how the unprecedented ocean of images in advertisements, cinema, television, and the press entered and transformed the subject and everyday life with unprecedented force; feminist artists like Laurie Simmons and Cindy Sherman used the medium to explore how representations of women conditioned their behaviors and identities. As this was the decade in which Pollock came of age, it is no surprise that the Virtual Feminist Museum asks us to bridge “conscious expressions (artists working in time and place with historically specific materials and conditions) and unconscious conditions (structural, persistent, formative, non-linear and even atemporal...)”³⁵ I will conclude this paper by briefly situating Winant’s installation within one framework of thinking about the unconscious and photography: that of the camera as mechanical mother.

³² Ibid 21.

³³ Winant, UCLA artist talk, 2019.

³⁴ Mignon Nixon, “After Images,” *October* 83 (Winter 1998): 118.

³⁵ Pollock, Encounters, 20.

In her 2012 book, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Elissa Marder argues that photography is a maternal medium: it is as undeniable and indescribable as the labor of birth (both are uncanny acts of creation.) They share a vocabulary: the “birth” of photography, “developing” a picture, photographic “reproduction.” Photographs perform the work of “mothering” by endowing their subjects with social, codifiable bodies. They are also, by definition, artifacts of the past, as is the formation of the subject, which occurs in a pre-Oedipal phase where a child is physically dependent on the mother and has not yet formed language. This past is primal, but unthinkable, a source of unconscious anxiety as a missed encounter in our past that we are both bound to and exiled from, but one that the mother, like the photographer, was present for.

It is for this reason that language fails to account for the actual experience of birth, writes Marder. “There is no way, in language, to articulate the unspeakable but undeniable fact that our bodies are the material residue of a prior passage through the mother’s womb.”³⁶ This is how psychoanalysis explains the absence of images of birth in art and culture: in the pre-Oedipal state that predates language, it is beyond expressibility, and is thus censored from spoken and written language. In her influential book, *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry takes this one step further, by suggesting that the ease or difficulty with which something can be verbally represented also determines whether it can be politically represented.³⁷ The failure to represent the lived experience of birth, on account of physical pain being unsharable, disempowers the mother. Per Lacan’s theory of the Imaginary, once the (male) child acquires language, he transcends his relation to the maternal body, devalues it, and to make up for the sense of loss, forms the paternal principles that exclude women/mothers from public spheres of culture and Law.³⁸

Photography enables a return to the scene of one’s own birth. Winant uses images of childbirth to reclaim the process of shaping the subject and returns to the

³⁶ Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 154.

³⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 12.

³⁸ Mulvey and Pollock, “Conversation,” 3-4.

mother her confiscated body through a new pictorial language. This language—what Eti Wade called “new maternalist aesthetic forms,” and Andrea Liss titled “thinking (m)otherwise”—strikes down the Oedipal phallogentrism that has long been ashamed of the mother’s strength, surprised and horrified by her drives, and subsequently erased her lived experience in favor of an idealized woman with divine composure.³⁹ Seeing a once invisible past resembles the *second sight* that Barthes describes in *Camera Lucida*: which at once “carr[ies] me back to somewhere in myself” with the promise to “bear me forward toward a utopian time.”⁴⁰ This is a feminist future that recognizes a figure whose hands, eyes, body, voice we associate with our primal sensations and earliest social experiences, who first teaches us love and disappointment, power and tenderness, who is capable of feeling love, but also anxiety, physical exhaustion, anger, boredom, and ambivalence.⁴¹ It is a feminist future that restores maternal subjectivity and ruptures the mutual exclusivities that have so far censored her. The mother in a feminist future does not abide by the mutual exclusivities of mother/feminist or mother/artist. A feminist future in which the VFM is possible expands her definition, and welcomes in non-female mothers, mothers with different legal statuses, mothers who perform sex as labor, disabled mothers, and low-income mothers. Winant imagines such a utopia, in which the mother plays a role in establishing a feminist future; she wonders, in an imaginary conversation with her son, who was born just before installation began: “would you reflexively know forever what I endured for you and your body?”⁴²

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When she first wrote of the Virtual Feminist Museum, Pollock was convinced that its realization was impossible: “what corporation would sponsor a feminist intervention which challenges the assumptions of class, race and gender that underpin the current social system despite gestures of inclusiveness and minor corrections to its histories of discrimination?”⁴³ A decade later, by using the tools at the museum’s disposal—the

³⁹ Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art*, xv.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Marder, *The Mother*, 165.

⁴¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976), 12.

⁴² Carmen Winant, “Mother Mother, Mother Mother,” (Self-published text), 2016.

⁴³ Pollock, *Encounters*, 10.

Institution, encounter, photomechanically reproduced image, and assembling the archive—Winant offers us a way forward.

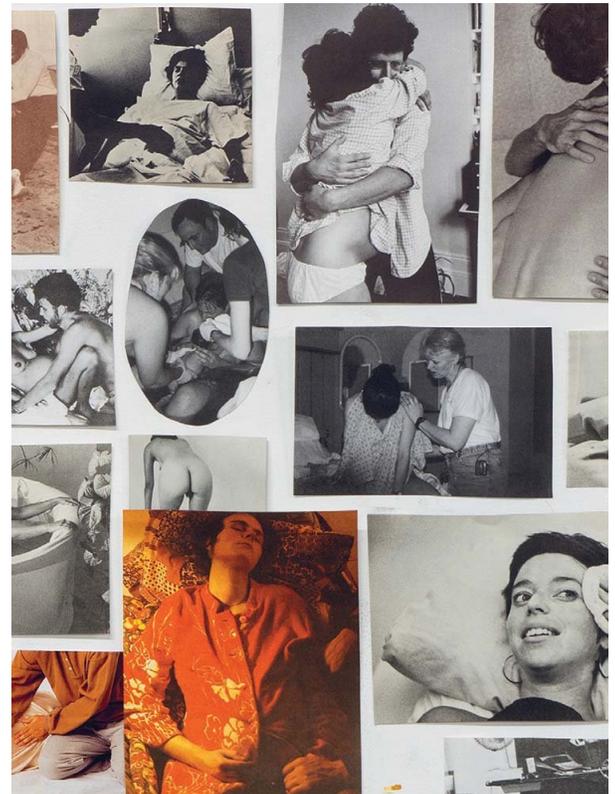


Fig. 1-3 Carmen Winant, *My Birth*, installation at MoMA, NY, 2018.



Fig. 4 Frida Kahlo, *My Birth*, 1932

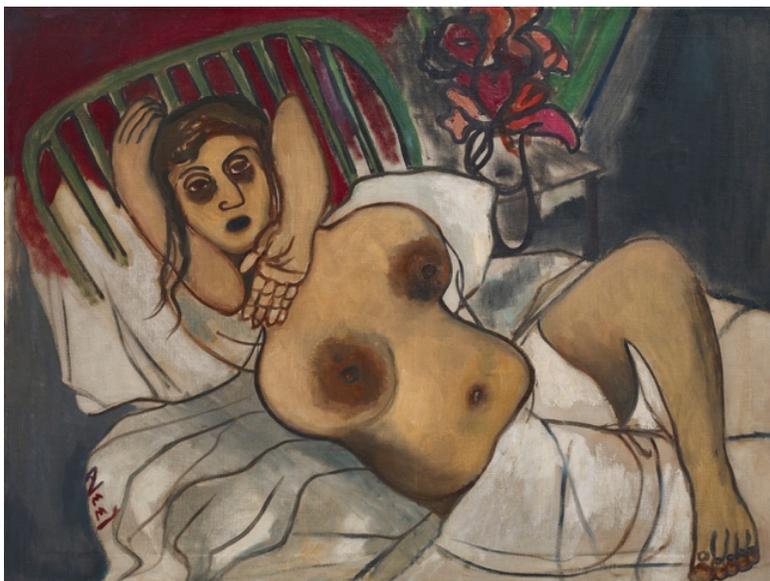


Fig. 5 Alice Neel, *Childbirth*, 1939

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