

The Assisted Paintings Series

Perhaps by Means of Gestures

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If we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story... we will remain paralyzed. Deprived of our movements. Rigid, whereas we are made for endless change.

Irigaray, 1981

The Assisted Painting Series was produced during the two years that the German artist Bettina Semmer was an MA student at Goldsmiths College in London. The title arises from a method of production in which the artist shared the space of the canvas with her daughter Babette whose contributions to the process began when she was one and a half years old and ended when she turned three.

I first saw seven of the thirty-two Assisted Paintings at Spacex Gallery (March 2000) where they were contextualised by a series of painting workshops, aimed at toddlers and their carers, that ran concurrently with the exhibition. The on-going results of the workshops were also on show but not surprisingly, there was a big difference between them and Semmer's large canvases. Some of that difference could be attributed to material factors such as scale and support and to that fact that Semmer's work was 'hung' in the large gallery whereas the numerous long paper sheets from the workshops were crowded into a smaller room. Nonetheless, the juxtaposition usefully exposed the error of that classic assumption about modern art 'my child could do that', while at the same time problematising the reception of Semmer's aesthetically convincing work precisely because it destabilised the authority of the gesture as the trace of the 'artist'.

It seemed to me that The Assisted Paintings offered a theoretical way forward for female painters trapped in the immobilising significance of the gesture as a culturally loaded (and gendered) term. What is more, the fact that the paintings were produced by a mother and daughter rendered them visual representations of that relationship with the potential to be seen, understood and theorised in ways that exceed the static configurations of that relationship produced by the discourses of patriarchy.

The debates about women and abstract painting occur within a context of doubt as to the relevance to twenty-first century art of painting in general, and non-figurative painting in particular. The alleged derailing of the masculine 'knowing' subject, whilst supposedly occasioning a crisis in masculinity, has opened up spaces for a celebration of the 'feminine' in art as all that the beleaguered male is not. However, claims for an aesthetic based on female 'difference', those expressions of otherness usually connoted negatively (irrational, unbounded, chaotic), not only maintain the old binary oppositions that structure sexuality and gender but also fail to acknowledge the ways in which those characteristics, culturally coded 'feminine', have been appropriated by male artists since at least the eighteenth century. As Katy Deepwell (1995) argues, marshalling French feminist theory's 'writing the body' as a strategy for describing a feminine aesthetic relies on similar ground of universality, binary opposition and a generally flabby understanding of the work of the theorists cited. Furthermore, as Griselda Pollock (1992) points out, to recolonize painting with specific meanings for and about women leaves both the notion of women as a collective body and painting as self-expression unexamined.

In terms of the former, the past thirty years of feminist debate has unsettled the term 'women' as a unified category that can be articulated, let alone speak for, or of, itself. Early opposition from black feminists pointed to the experiential disparities of race and class that render any universalising concept of 'woman' meaningless. The final decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of feminist interest in specificity: the understanding that embodiment, although anatomically sexed, is also impacted by differing and specific historical and material circumstances. Add to this the psychoanalytic mapping of the subject as always fragmented and unstable and the challenge to humanist assumptions about the individual becomes apparent. 'Painting' as a cultural form and abstraction in particular still relies for its meaning (and value) on the notion of the gestural mark as an index of a unified and expressive subject. Thus claims for the expression of a feminine imaginary in art are largely invalidated by virtue of the fact that the ground they rest on was initially ploughed by Modernism.

Despite this, many feminists, including Pollock, Deepwell, and myself, remain committed to the production of a set of feminist possibilities in painting that rely neither on binary oppositions nor humanist assumptions for their meaning. Such a project requires, first of all, attention to specificity, almost in the manner of a case study in which all factors of the production must be taken into account. In the case of the Assisted Paintings this begins with the physical and psychic condition of motherhood as configured in western culture. A story might illustrate the point:

Imagine the scene: Françoise Gilot has left Picasso, (again) to babysit for their two year old daughter Paloma. Anxious to get on with his work he takes the child to his studio but, like most two year olds, she soon grows bored with her playthings and demands her father's attention. With little regard for the sanctity of his canvas he gives the child a loaded brush and invites her to paint alongside him. She is happy, he is happy and thus begins many happy afternoons painting together.

But to consider some of Picasso's paintings as co-creations, produced with a child, might confuse their value (both financial and ideological) because the name Picasso is eponymous with 'artist' and signifies a singular individual whose creative output offers evidence of his genius. Despite the incursions of a postmodern consensus that the subject is split (and the author is dead) cultural faith in the artist as a unique and expressive individual not only lingers but has a stranglehold in the arts. Furthermore, the 'author' is always a grown-up individual despite the fact that the currency credited to maturity (in this sense) is generally belied by the societal obsession with youth. But we're all used to double standards.

This fatuous story points out the distance between the terms artist and father. The primacy of the former for the historical subject known as Picasso is so over-determined that the latter is all but erased although obviously not impossible as he fathered four children. Paternal identities are culturally embedded in the work they do and Picasso was an artist. The fact that he was also a father has little bearing on his reputation. This is not the case for mothers because, as Elaine Showalter points out, 'mothers don't write they are written'. Psychoanalysis, shored up by the discourses of health and sociology, confines mothers to the status of objects, rarely as subjects in their own right. There is very little distance between the terms artist and mother as evidenced by the tales that litter culture of children damaged by creative mothers as well as by the guilty conflict between the demands of motherhood and the needs of work that most women who are mothers endure. Women who sidestep this obligation cannot do so without bearing some burden of guilt that their child's physical and psychological development may in some way be compromised. It is

obvious that the gendered nature of the term 'artist' is underpinned by a set of practices not least of which is the implicit convention that there is a strict separation between fatherhood and work. This has implications for artists who are also mothers, particularly of young children, who must shift between often conflicting identities within a culture that foregrounds the 'duties' of the latter role.

Another point to the story concerns the question of authorship. How are we meant to view paintings that are made in collaboration with a child? Such a practice undermines a whole set of ideological beliefs and financial exchanges that govern the western art market. Despite the feminist insistence on crediting the collaborative role of women artists such as Jeannette-Claude or Coosje Van Bruggen in their partner's projects, there is still resistance to full and proper attribution. What are we to make of a female artist, already operating from a marginalised position by virtue of her sex, openly acknowledging her daughter's contribution to the work? Such a double insistence ensures relegation to the outer margins because it exposes the notions of authorship and artistic agency that prop up economic value. As feminists however, we are concerned with values other than financial and look instead for what it is that is being signified at the level of the work itself. What is at stake is a struggle for signification – what gets to be seen or said. Representations and their interpretation are one of the ways in which the symbolic can be renovated in order to generate new meanings, new understandings and new ways out of the impasse that positions women as undifferentiated and lacking.

The significance of *The Assisted Painting Series* lies not only in the fact that it subverts the notion of the author as a stable and unique individual but more importantly, that they make visible aspects and potentials of the mother/daughter relationship that have been foreclosed by patriarchal discourses. It could be argued that the genealogy of the series is Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document*, the landmark work in which Kelly explored (among other things) the ambivalence of maternal desire as split between the drive for her own autonomy and the loss that accompanies the child's burgeoning subjectivity. There is no doubt that Semmer's work explores similar ground, albeit in a more oblique manner, but the primary difference between these two works is the fact that Kelly's child was a boy, and as post-Freudian psychoanalysis has taught us, separation from the mother is different for girls.

Although daughterhood is the point of entry into the social system for every female subject (Florence: 1995:198) the mother / daughter relationship remains largely unsymbolised in western culture. The phallogocentric structures of psychoanalysis maintain women in a state of dereliction by insisting on the primacy of the oedipal complex as structuring a socialised subjectivity with access to the symbolic. The oedipus complex is predicated on the intersection of the mother / child relationship by a third term – what Lacan calls 'The Law of the Father' – which insists on the child's renunciation of the mother as a love object. The sight of the mother as 'castrated', combined with the recognition that the phallus-bearing father is more powerful, motivates the child to give up the mother (for fear of castration) and line up with the privileges, rewards and authority of patriarchy. But as many feminists have pointed out, the psychoanalytic subject is a male subject thus the implications of the oedipal dynamic for girls are very different. The female child has none of the rewards that possession of the phallus confer because she is also 'castrated' like the mother. Her only option – the first lesson of femininity - is to accept her status as 'lacking'. According to classic psychoanalysis, the girl child not only has to give up her mother as a love object but she must also direct her love towards her father as possessor of the phallus. This dynamic sets up an irresolvable conflict between the mother and daughter who are now left to compete for the father with his phallic authority. This positioning of mother and daughter in

oppositional terms has been justifiably critiqued by many feminists. But just as the limitations of an uncritical celebratory 'feminine' in relation to aesthetic practice have been pointed out, so too must any reconfiguration of the mother / daughter relationship take into account its complexities. Irigaray's work offers us a way of thinking through these questions in terms that are neither oppositional nor strictly celebratory. Irigaray helps me to 'make sense' of The Assisted Painting Series.

THE PROCESS

In July 2000, I traveled to Baden-Baden to see all thirty one paintings in the series and to talk to Bettina Semmer about its origins and what the process of making the pictures actually was. Semmer told me that she had moved to London from Hamburg in February, 1989 at the behest of her (then) lover whose child she was carrying. She obtained some part time teaching at Wimbledon and Babette was born the following August. Semmer described her first year with Babette as one in which she felt 'housebound and ambivalent' 'watching herself performing motherhood'. When Babette was a year old, Semmer enrolled on an MA programme at Goldsmiths College in London. At the time she was painting 'mock-Richter' screen paintings, dissolving imagery that explored the taboo linkages of babies, sex, death and porn.

Semmer remembered that her initial idea to have Babette paint on her canvases occurred one evening when she was looking at some marks her daughter had made on the kitchen wall. The marks were beneath two square prints by David Batchelor and she noticed that they stopped at the point where the child could no longer reach. In the introduction to her MA thesis, Semmer describes her decision to include Babette in her creative process as follows:

„What I found was a perfect painting machine and more. The child, of course as a complete fantasy – innocent, spontaneous, playful, existing in an imaginative world of its own but capable of doing things that we can't do (anymore).“

So rather than the work coming about accidentally, through the exigencies of childcare, there was an intentionality in the process that took the form of an experiment. Of course this doesn't negate the issue of childcare because obviously bringing Babette to the studio solved a lot of problems for Semmer. Semmer's view of her daughter as a 'painting machine' however suggests a sense of detachment that verges on exploitation – a view that contradicts cultural constructions of the maternal. In fact it makes sense to want some kind of payback for the drudgery of childcare but it is a sentiment that is rarely, if ever, voiced.

Semmer took Babette to the studio with her the next day and thus the collaboration began. Semmer mixed colours selected by Babette to a consistency that the toddler could handle. She hung the painting on the wall at a height that placed the top half of the canvas out of the child's reach and then, giving her a brush for each colour, she sat back and watched. Semmer described Babette as 'very concentrated while she was painting but also very clear about when she was finished'. She also noticed that from the beginning Babette had a clear sense of the space of the canvas as well as different gestural responses to the various background colours. Sometimes the child produced an 'orgy of colour' while at others her chosen palette was much more restrained.

The Assisted Painting Series is made up of three, clearly differentiated subsets consisting of portraits of Babette (4); paintings with words (10); and pure abstraction (18). These correspond to both Babette's developing subjectivity and the articulation of their mother /

daughter relationship as on-going processes. The subsets, like the processes they describe, are not strictly chronological as kinds of 'texts' might be worked on simultaneously or in quick succession. This points to the fluidity of a process in which neither term dominates. In fact, the painting as a text co-produced by mother and daughter is constitutive of a third term that has equal bearing on the direction the project might take at any particular moment.

In one of the earliest paintings „Untitled (B. with Spaghetti)“, 1991, the two square metre canvas shows a black and white photorealistic portrait of Babette gazing at a string of spaghetti held in an outstretched hand. The image is truncated, cropped just below the crotch and there are bits of background around the figure as if it had been crudely cut out from a larger picture. The figure of the child occupies the top right hand section of the canvas which is like a large white void. Diagonally opposite the image is a cluster of broad strokes of colour – blue interspersed with violet, yellow bisected by brown. One solitary mark floats above the main cluster of colour as if Babette had suddenly stood on tiptoe. The main horizontal band of colour occupies a clearly delineated space which, if the canvas were divided into four equal squares, would be the top half of the bottom left square. Beneath some of the marks, drips flow down to the edge of the but beneath the yellow – which must have been thicker – there are some separate brushstrokes of green. What is most interesting about the painting is that on the bottom right-hand side of the canvas, just beneath the portrait, there are two orange flourishes, one of which also drips to the bottom edge. The spatial arrangement of Babette's contribution suggests that she recognised the portrait as separate and defined, thus the two orange marks beneath it act as a form of signature.

The smaller canvas (170 x 170 cms), „Untitled (B. with Hooded Coat)“, 1991, has the portrait cropped at the chest and taking up less space on the vertical plane. The image is counterposed by Babette's painting which again begins in the bottom left corner but extends horizontally across a greater area. The marks themselves are less vibrantly coloured being executed primarily in black and dark green. There is however, one broad translucent line of blue that reaches right up and touches the image of the child. In „Untitled (B. at beach)“, 1991, the portrait occupies the centre of the top half of a 210 x 210 cms canvas. The scale of the image is unsettling as a much larger-than-life-size crouching baby, its head as big as its' foreshortened body, stares out from the blank white canvas. The image is cropped at the bottom along a clear but invisible horizon line that amputates its toes and the right hand from the wrist down. Beneath the big baby, the blocks of colour are laid down more emphatically ranging from 'hot' reds and yellows on the left to the so-called 'cool' shades of blue and mauve. Again, some of the paint drips down to the edge but the thick brushmarks finish just beyond the centralised space of the portrait. Their starting point on the left side is equidistant in a similar relationship to the baby above thus the painting effectively forming a frame or parameter for the image. Where the deep purple paint ends on the right, a band of faint child's handprints in the same colour continues almost to the edge of the canvas. This index of the child's presence together with the portrait above references those keepsakes that combine a photograph of baby with a footprint or lock of hair. But this monstrous baby caricatures the genre allowing space for maternal ambivalence in which the mother retains her separate identity as author and commentator.

The fact that Babette seemed to recognise the images in the paintings as herself, confirms Lacan's account of the mirror phase as the moment in which the child, seeing its image, experiences itself as separate from the mother. Of course, Lacan (and psychoanalysis in general) has little to say about the mother's subjectivity which is why these paintings are

significant. Semmer provided her daughter with the means to 'make her mark' – to make meaning – and stood aside while she did it. Conceptualising her daughter as a 'painting machine' is antithetical to the kind of pre-oedipal merging proposed by patriarchy. It could almost be construed as an articulation of the split subject – with Babette as the id – except that the gesture of respect that Semmer accorded to her daughter suggests the co-creation of a mutual space – the painting – which is performed in and upon separately by two related female subjects. The emphasis on the co-equivalence of separation / relation is particularly legible in those paintings where the ground is bisected horizontally. Separation is maintained (by the mother) who dictates the child's access to the spatial plane. However, the child can encroach on prohibited territory by gesture – standing on tiptoe, reaching harder or even by growing a little taller each day. Or the mother gives the child a chair or a table to stand on. In this way the paintings enact a game of give and take that is playful, reciprocal and designed to test and continuously re-establish the boundaries between them. It has nothing to do with 'Fort-Da'.

If the four portraits can be understood in relation to the mirror phase, then the next ten 'word' paintings relate to the acquisition of language and (gendered) subjectivity. In general, these are large monochromes, some of which are divided horizontally into a two-colour ground. They are inscribed with phrases taken from the writings of Wittgenstein, the words uniformly spaced on black, blue or white backgrounds. They read like nonsensical fragments of statements or questions such as: 'steam comes out of the pot and also pictured steam comes out' or 'what if one insisted on saying that there must also be something'. Semmer chose to use excerpts from Wittgenstein's writings because of the way he 'investigates language like a child pulling a toy apart'. He also represented for Semmer some kind of 'ultimate authority' her relation to which paralleled her position as a woman painter. Steam coming out of the pot encapsulated all the fears for the safety of her child that came with motherhood. And then there was the whole question of language.

Tensions with Babette's father foregrounded the question for Semmer: in which language – German or English? – would she speak to Babette? The oedipal complex dictates that the maternal bond is severed by the entry of a third term – the 'law of the father'. This dynamic is complicated however when the mother and child share a language that literally bars the father's entry notwithstanding the on-going language of their shared creative process. In four 1991 paintings entitled *Steam comes out*; *What if...;* *In the picture* and *Of course...* Wittgenstein's original text is further broken up by being scattered across the four paintings. Where the words are widely spaced so too are Babette's marks and vice versa. The daughter follows her mother's rhythms. In *The rule... 1991* and *Die Regel... 1991* the same words are written on each painting in different languages (German and English). The ground is monochrome with no delineation of space and Babette paints on top of some of the words, effectively obliterating their authority.

ABSTRACTION

Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other. You / I: we are always several at once. And how could one dominate the other? Impose her voice, her tone, her meaning? One cannot be distinguished from the other; which does not mean that they are indistinct.

With total abandon (of language and image) the abstract paintings make up the largest portion of the series. In them, rather than controlling the child's body as in the processes of

socialisation such as toilet training etc., the mother controls the canvas in relation to the child's body. She moves it around, turns it on its side or upside down as a way of offering full access. At the same time, she imposes structures in the form of solid bands of colour, sometimes covering up the child's marks but at others creating a new field for her child to play in. In some of the paintings, the geometric bands appear like corners of a room, the walls splashed with bursts of colour. And Babette, what does she give her mother? She brings her colour when it had been all but eliminated, reduced to black and white. She cuts loose abstraction from its patriarchal anchorage allowing it for both of them. And in time, she perfects her gesture to make the outline of a house.

The final painting in the series, entitled *The End*, 1992, appears at first sight to be entirely red. Close up however a universe of differentiated marks and tones play across the surface with deeply inscribed lines scraping it away to reveal the colour beneath. It is unclear who made which mark yet all the marks are separate and distinct, not merged. The whole painting is over-washed with the thinnest red paint, containing it like a protective webbing. The rich, sensual red evokes the heart (not the womb) and brings to mind Irigaray's term 'amorous language'. The Assisted Painting Series signifies a mother / daughter relationship in which the mother is not abjected in order to 'give birth' to the daughter. In a sense, Babette gives birth to herself by making a mark – an act that is facilitated by her mother in her (separate) identity as an artist who happens to be a mother. Nor is the daughter subsumed by the mother and doomed to repetition because she is also a 'painting machine'. Together they give birth (to the paintings) and to themselves as the space of the work enables them to enact their relationship as a complex and always on-going process of separate and fused identities.