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Dana Schutz, *How We Would Give Birth* (2007). Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

The Art of Birth

There are some bodily experiences that overwhelm language. It's not that they are too intense, or too painful to *want* to apply words to, it is that language actually cannot contain them. Episodes of physical pain, in particular, "require [a] shattering of language...[they are] fundamentally unsharable," writes Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*.¹ Without the ability to relate certain subjective feelings, we rely on metaphor to do the work for us, conveying meaning through suggestion. Nietzsche, in the spirit of absurdity and resignation, called his pain "dog"—it might have gotten any name, so far was it from being aptly describable in words.²

I gave birth³ to my first child nine weeks ago. The experience of labor, which lasted through the night, and then a day, and then another night, didn't resemble any of the near-hundreds of representations of it that I've seen on television or in the movies over the years. It didn't resemble any familiar experience at all. I desperately want to explain it, but don't have the tools. Overly medical language—details of my blood levels, the baby's pendulous heart rate, and uterine dilation and effacement—won't do. Likewise, phrases like "life-changing" feel highfalutin and exclusive.

I turn to metaphor as an intermediary. If I can't describe it, what, at least, was it like? After the birth of her son Nicholas in 1962, Sylvia Plath wrote in her journal: "[It felt like] a huge, black circular weight, like the end of a cannon or a

crossbar... was tearing through me." Her first question to the doctor after delivery: "Did he tear me to bits?" is echoed by Maggie Nelson, almost 50 years later. "What if I fall to pieces?" she writes in her 2015 book, *The Argonauts*, as she prepares to deliver her first child, Iggy.

Due to my own frustrated and failed attempts to deal with the subject of birth in my creative work, I've spent my postpartum life seeking out its representation in contemporary art. Though I was sure I'd find precedent, I've largely come up short. I am not very interested in the subject of pregnancy, or the all-inclusive experience of motherhood, for which Mary Kelly remains the paragon. Artists do occasion these topics—the before and after of childbirth—yet it is the physical action itself that is distinctly lacking from the folios of art history.

I can think of a few reasons for this lack. To no surprise for anyone who is awake to culture, art persists as a patriarchal and sexist economy. "Women's issues"—and what is considered more of a woman's issue than *birth*?—are deemed less worthy of making serious visual and critical interventions into. Until a mere few decades ago in this country, soon-to-be fathers sat in waiting rooms while their wives gave birth without them several hundred feet away. It is not surprising that the *image* of birth has not yet entered the mainstream as mutually interesting and worthwhile, belonging in different ways to both genders. Just as we have the mistaken idea that terminating

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1. Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. Print.

2. Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Walter Arnold Kaufmann. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. New York: Vintage, 1974. Print.

pregnancies has nothing to do with the men who were involved in creating them (only women are charged with, and bear the consequences of, illegally seeking abortions in the United States and abroad), our cultural imaginations are too limited around the experience of birth. Relegating “women’s issues” to a less serious platform is a problem, but more importantly, it is a problem that we subdivide and partition issues as strictly as we do in the first place. Our experiences are far from the same; no political, personal, or cultural experience, in other words, *strictly* belongs to a woman or a man. How we bring life into the world is no exception.⁶

Why else might there be so few images of birth in contemporary art? As opposed to mothering, birth is done out of sight, often considered too private for even close family members to be present. Putting aside the difficulty of doing so successfully, transmuting something so intimate into a public (and perhaps commercial) vessel cannot be easy. What good artist has not feared exploiting their most personal moments to offer up as serious “work?”⁷ I can understand the impulse to keep the experience private; my partner photographed parts of my delivery, and, upon seeing images a few weeks later—all open legs, red with blood and other fluids—I balked at the idea of sending them to family or friends as planned. I wasn’t exactly embarrassed; in fact I was amazed. I felt very, very vulnerable.

While representations of pregnancy don’t abound within the art world, they are more available than images of birth. Justine Kurland’s 2006 series *Of Women Born* (a reference to the 1978 manifesto on motherhood by the feminist poet Adrienne Rich and a clue about the work’s politics) is a good example. In the photographs, nude, full-term

pregnant women cluster sylph-like on the beach and recline inside boulders; in other images, their young children run and swim and sleep among them. As with a handful of other female artists—Alice Neel and Dana Hoey for instance—Kurland extensively pictures the period of gestation, as well as its aftermath. But where are the images of the birthing process—the *labor*? Too grotesque? Too private? Too much a women’s issue? Not romantic enough (or at all)? Why does that part of the narrative always fall away?

There are really only a handful of contemporary artworks that actually picture the act of birthing as its central focus—most notably the *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) by the experimental filmmaker Stan Brackhage. A particularly arresting one is by the painter Dana Schutz. Titled *How We Would Give Birth* (2007), the painting directly, and somewhat fearlessly, depicts as its subject a woman in the midst of having a child. Her near-disjointed legs are spread wide, revealing a halfway-out baby in the center of the canvas. Her arms, which jut out from below a white sheet that is draped across her naked body, hold the sides of the gurney but don’t appear to strain under the burden of delivery. She is all alone.

It takes a lot to pivot attention from a baby coming out of a body, surrounded by an open vagina, pubic hair, and fresh blood. The real nuance of the painting, it turns out, occurs in psychic lines created by the woman’s gaze, directed over her shoulder to a back wall, towards a Hudson Valley School-style landscape painting of a falling waterfall. Her swiveled face, lost in the painting-within-a-painting, is entirely unseen, and the relationship of the woman and the wall painting—however melodramatic—reads as the most meaningful one in the frame. What is happening in this meditative

3. Margaret Atwood brilliantly undoes this phrase, “giving birth” in her short story of the same name. She writes: “But who gives it? And to whom is it given?... No one ever says giving death, though they are in some ways the same, events, not things. And delivering, the act the doctor is generally believed to perform: who delivers what? Is it the mother who is delivered, like

a prisoner being released? Surely not; nor is it the child being delivered to the mother like a letter through a slot. How can you be both the sender and received at once? Was someone in bondage, is someone made free?” Atwood, Margaret. *Giving Birth*. Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1977. Print.

exchange? Does Schutz intend to imbue a kind of subjectivity in her that is usually denied a woman in the moments and hours that she becomes a delivery instrument? Is it a meta reference to the immersive and escapist powers of landscape art, and by proxy, painting itself?⁸

As with all powerful art, its propositions are conflictual. Funny and unsettling, Schutz has made a painting that has competing protagonists and dissenting storylines. But most of all, *How We Would Give Birth* achieves a double consciousness all its own: it offers up the thing *and* the metaphor for that thing in the same picture. Here is the event: groin spread open, the bloody sheets, the swollen head and slithery body of a half-fetus, half-baby. And here is the symbol: a figure who turns to the landscape to better understand, feel, and escape from her ineffable condition. Schutz has long believed that painting can achieve both quotidian and fantastical possibilities (*Swimming, Smoking, Crying*, 2009, for instance, or *Getting Dressed all at Once*, 2012, are both demonstrative of this vision). *Birth*, which already contains notes of the surreal and the surreal, is a fitting subject.

Since making the painting in 2007, Schutz had a baby, careening her experience from the imaginary to the realized. Considering how the experience changed her interpretation of her existing work, she said in an audio commentary accompanying her exhibition at The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, "The fact is, I would paint this differently now [after having giving birth]... Well, I am not sure if *I would* paint it now. Part of the interest at the time was the *not knowing*."

This unknowing, for me, doesn't shift with the experience, it only intensifies. As I reach for the words to faithfully describe birth, or attempt to

make art that does the same, I am continually struck, and even moved, by the ways in which I flounder and fall short, and by the visual or linguistic metaphors that arise to bridge the gap created by unknowing. This productive dissonance—between experience and its representation, bodily sensation and the drive to picture it—is always the stuff of great art (it is, to return to the affecting language of Elaine Scarry, its own kind of making and unmaking of the world). Birth, the strangest and most essential kind of entropy, offers us that possibility.

4. Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Anchor, 2000. Print.

5. Ancient art is another matter. While I won't focus on it here, it is worth mentioning how frequently the birthing female figure is depicted in the pre-modern era. I've come across many crude figurations in this research of swollen-bellied women, squatting with babies suspended from between their legs.

6. Stan Brakhage's amazing experimental work, *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), is a nice example of this. The twelve-minute film documents the birth of Brakhage's first child, Myrrenna. It was made at home in 1958, as the hospital would not have allowed the artist access to the delivery room with his then-wife Jane. Through fast splices and close, silent shots, the camera switches back and forth between husband and wife, who film one another during labor; as their baby pushes through, Brackage moves in closer, filming its entry.

7. During a Sophie Calle lecture I once attended in San Francisco, Calle played a video she made of her mother's final breaths in the process of dying, a piece that had been shown at the Venice Biennale. I felt a mild horror come over the audience; Calle's only response: "She would have loved the attention."

8. Schutz's painting calls up the great Frida Kahlo work, *My Birth* (1932), in which Kahlo imagines laboring herself into the world. In it, the baby's large head has also pushed out of a vagina, exposed through wide-open legs, and pictured in the center of the frame. As in Schutz's painting, the woman's face—the artist as her own literal and figurative creator—is covered, in this case by a sheet. Finally, Kahlo's painting also includes within it a painting-within-a-painting on the back wall. This time, the image, which is of a veiled female figure, is above and behind the birth scene, and the subject makes no contact with it. In part because of this specific denial—not necessarily between woman and baby, but rather woman and art—the birth scene calls up trauma more than transcendence.