

**The Mother Without Child/
The Child Without Mother:
Miriam Schaer's
Interrogation of Maternal
Ideology, Reproductive
Trauma, and Death**

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“Part of coming to terms with Infertility, I’ve come to realize, is understanding just how pervasive it is in controlling not only your body but your life, your future, your plans.

Now about that hold button. It’s just so difficult to disconnect entirely. Preparing indefinitely for an outcome that Infertility hijacked has thrown me for a loop. I’m a little like a prisoner being released after a 12 year sentence. I hardly know how to act.”

—Pamela Tsigdinos (“Please Hold for the Children”)

“I always thought I’d have a child,
but I also knew there were problems.
I didn’t really think too much about it.
After a couple of rounds
of infertility treatments that didn’t work, my husband said
“maybe we should just focus on us. If it happens, great,
if not-that’s ok too.”
I began to focus on my work, my art, my life.
A gynecologist at the time said to me:
“Make a decision: have children or not.
If you can’t have them biologically
consider other options.
But if you are not going to have children,
live a life you can’t if you do have children.”
—Miriam Schaer (*The Presence of Their Absence*)

For the past several years, Miriam Schaer has been making work about not being a mother. Schaer foregrounds the ambiguity of being biologically childless despite the brave new world of reproductive technology and, at the same time, forces us to question what it means to be a mother and how that term may be defined. A brief experience with fertility treatments and the advice of a compassionate doctor motivated Schaer to explore infertility and not being a mother in her work in order to question the universal and limiting ideology of motherhood that transcends the distinctions of class, race, nationality, ethnicity, and gender identity. Schaer began embroidering white baby clothes with insensitive statements made about childbearing to women experiencing infertility. Schaer obtained a number of hyper-realistic baby dolls and dressed them in embroidered garments, with the idea that the statements on the clothing were part and parcel of the ideology that produced these realistic dolls, many of which were handmade (to enhance the verisimilitude), expensive, and consumed primarily by upper-middle-class white women. Schaer photographed herself with and without these dolls, and showed the photographs to her mother Ida, who had recently been diagnosed with dementia. Schaer purchased a sleeping baby doll named Tabitha for Ida, and then photographed Ida with Tabitha and with her adult children. When Ida passed away, Schaer became both a mother without a child and a child without a

mother. This motivated Schaer to question the ideology of the maternal, an identity to which women are expected to aspire even as their status is undermined because they are mothers. Unlike most accounts of infertility in which the author blames feminism for making her think she could have it all, Schaer actively invokes her feminism and feminist strategies of artmaking in order to engage with a patriarchal ideology that limits rather than expands women's options. Schaer's artistic interpretations of infertility, the ideology of motherhood, and the stifling expectations that come with what it means to be a mother can be understood within the history of reproductive technologies and within feminist explorations of maternal identity, with and without children.¹

ART (Artificial Reproductive Technologies) as a Feminist Strategy?

In the 1970s, at the height of second-wave feminism, the nascent fertility industry was initially embraced by feminists. When, in 1970, Shulamith Firestone called for an end to the tyranny of the biological family through the use of reproductive technology, she, and her readers, could never have envisioned the brave new world of egg freezing, test tube babies, and surrogates in India that has come about almost fifty years later. Firestone saw ART as freeing up women to pursue their goals without fear that they would wait too long to have children. In 1976, Adrienne Rich, the mother of three sons, published *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience*, in which she argues that there are “two meanings of motherhood ... the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control.” The institution of motherhood, according to Rich, alienates women from their bodies. Echoing Firestone, Rich argues that “women are controlled by lashing us to our bodies.” With the birth of Louise Brown, the first test tube baby, still two years away, Rich in 1976 could envision a world in which access to birth control, abortion, and reproductive healthcare would free women to realize their potential.

The close association between feminism and reproductive treatments in the 1970s may explain why contemporary writers, many of them

self-identified feminists, still hold feminism accountable for the condition of infertility rather than the institution of motherhood, of which the infertility industry is a part. Miriam Zoll, in her memoir *Cracked Open: Liberty, Fertility, and the Pursuit of High Tech Babies* (2013), actually blames feminism—with its promise that women can have it all—for the infertility crisis. Zoll writes that “to learn later, after painful personal experience, that the vast majority of reproductive technologies do not, in fact, result in live births is a double tragedy. Not only are we coping with the loss of a deep primal desire to birth offspring, we must also come to terms with the fact that we built our entire ‘women-can-finally-have-it-all’ adult life on an illusion.”

Or consider Ariel Levy, writer for *The New Yorker*, whose formative years were spent experimenting sexually, culturally, and chemically in New York City. Writing her memoir on the other side of forty and a rather horrific second trimester miscarriage, Levy frequently referenced the promise of feminism, which had not been delivered: “Women of my generation were given the lavish gift of our own agency by feminism—a belief that we could decide for ourselves how we would live, what would become of us” (69). Ironically, according to Levy, her friends became deeply regretful that they had chosen not to have children earlier in life when they turned forty and realized that their fertility had declined steeply. As Levy put it, “Fertility meant nothing to us in our twenties ... and then—abruptly, horrifyingly—it became urgent” (85). Levy’s feminist friends probably felt adrift because there are no books on infertility as a feminist concern (unlike Suzy Orbach’s *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*). Instead, infertility is seen as a personal and even embarrassing issue, hence the title of Pamela Tsigdinos’ book: *Silent Sorority*.

The treatment of infertility has become a multibillion dollar industry—in which those with the financial wherewithal can purchase eggs, semen, and wombs from those whose lives are considerably more precarious—and has little in common with the utopian world of female equality envisioned by Firestone. The reproductive technologies that Firestone celebrated have been realized, albeit not with the results that Firestone envisioned. Far from being liberated from reproductive tyranny, as Firestone optimistically predicted, women—or at least predominantly Caucasian, affluent, married, and primarily heterosexual ones living in the developed world—have become even more enslaved

to the imperative of the biological family, in part because of the seductiveness of the availability of ART, which have a statistically low chance of being successful once a woman is past forty. The test tube baby, which Firestone thought could potentially eliminate male supremacy in the family, has simply reinforced the imperative to reproduce within the structure of the nuclear family, even, or especially, when it comes to same-sex couples. Childlessness has become the purview of the affluent who can afford the increasingly invasive procedures that often *do not* result in a baby.

Even after many rounds of in-vitro fertilization, donor eggs, culled sperm, and doctor's visits, no pregnancy is often the result. Infertility is a condition that has no prejudices. It afflicts men and women of all nationalities, ethnicities, religious beliefs, racial backgrounds, and class circumstances equally. That said, infertility is disproportionately visible among upper-middle-class, well-educated, primarily Caucasian or Caucasian-identified women, largely because this is the group that has the means to pay for the numerous treatments and to access the technology as well as the level of education to write about their experiences with reproductive technologies, infertility, and the medical world. Tsigdinos in many ways represents the growing population of upper-middle-class women who are beginning to publicly acknowledge the trauma that infertility has caused them. Tsigdinos was twenty-nine years old and working as a marketer for a venture capitalist company in Northern California when she decided to have children. She tried for eleven years to get pregnant before she and her husband Alex made the decision to stop trying in 2007. Feeling alone and alienated, Tsigdinos turned to the Internet and discovered an online community of women who had had the same experiences as she had. Like these women, she turned to blogging, which allowed her to participate in the community of women with infertility and eventually move on from the trauma that she felt ("Identity Lost and Found"). Tsigdinos's first blog, *Coming to Terms: Barren and Beautiful*, which ran from 2007 to 2015, chronicled her journey from anger to acceptance of infertility. As well, the blog chronicled the transformation of Tsigdinos from bereft childless mother to infertility superstar commentator. By the time that she ended *Coming to Terms* and started the website and blog *Silent Sorority* in 2009 (the two blogs overlapped by several years) Tsigdinos had been the subject of a feature article in the *New York Times* (Barrow; Tsigdinos,

“Struggling to Accept”), the author of a book about her experiences (*Silent Sorority*), and the author, subject, and commentator of numerous interviews, podcasts, and articles about the trauma and prevalence of infertility, most of which are linked on her blogs and website.

Tsigdinos, whose pain and trauma were so palpable that she began to cry when interviewed for *The New York Times* in 2008, was able to come to terms with her grief by becoming an activist and a writer, whereas Schaer did what she had always done—making art, writing books, creating installations, and doing performances—about her experiences. On the surface, Tsigdinos and Schaer seemed to have quite a bit in common; both are educated, upper-middle-class women who experienced infertility. By the time she published *Silent Sorority*, Tsigdinos had become an outspoken critic of infertility treatments, which, as she noted in an article co-authored with Miriam Zoll for *The New York Times*, was a \$4 billion a year industry in 2013. Noting that the global failure rate of assisted reproductive cycles was 77%, Tsigdinos and Zoll conclude in their article that “it’s no wonder that, fueled by magical thinking, the glorification of parenthood and a cultural narrative that relentlessly endorses assisted reproductive technology, those of us going through treatments often turn into ‘fertility junkies.’” Buoyed by the can-do optimism of American culture, women who chose to walk away from fertility treatments before exploring all of their options often consider themselves weak and are often considered weak by a society that values heterosexual reproduction as long as it was middle class.

Like Tsigdinos, Schaer and her partner eventually chose to stop the infertility treatments and to be childless by choice. Schaer has also been critical of the sociocultural circumstances that push women into the increasingly invasive fertility treatments that do not work. Schaer ended the treatments after only a few attempts, and quickly moved on and immersed herself in her artmaking and teaching. Schaer took agency from her decision, preferring to call herself childless by choice rather than by accident. Even more importantly, Schaer has constructed her own childlessness through the agency of her feminism and has used that feminism as scaffolding for her life as an educator and artist. Schaer’s work can be seen as operating from the position of “the mother without child,” which Elaine Tuttle Hansen has defined as a woman who wants children but cannot become pregnant and give

birth to a biological child and who is considered infertile or barren because her body does not work rather than because she chooses not to have children (431). Tuttle Hansen argues that “the ‘good’ woman and mother can speak only to erase her authority, to renounce possession, to disown her desire; a mother is someone who sacrifices something she has and wants, or is willing to do so, for the good of another” (448). The mother without child provides an alternative to this patriarchal narrative of self-sacrifice that started with the story of King Solomon, who in his so-called wisdom suggested that the child be cut in half, for, as Tuttle Hansen argues, it frees feminists to focus on the mother “and in doing so to see her as a multifaceted and changeable subject” (447). Tuttle Hansen argues that “the mother without child ... can subvert these categories of criminal or victim, bad or good mother, by not fitting comfortably into either or by occupying both at the same time” (451). Schaer’s work should be understood as operating from the ambiguous position of mother and not-mother, a position that questions the role of mother from a feminist position. Schaer neither laments her childless state nor embraces it; rather, she unpacks the ideological construction of childlessness today.

Babies (Not) on Board?

Schaer relates in her autobiographical artist’s book *The Presence of their Absence* how her decision not to pursue expensive reproductive technologies permitted her to realize that childless women were actively discriminated against (26-27). Embracing her role as the mother without child, Schaer suggests that “the most radical notion of motherhood, one might argue, is not to have children in the first place” (48-49). Stung by the often insensitive comments made regarding her decision to not have children, a decision that in Schaer’s case would have potentially involved compromising her health and financial security, Schaer began collecting comments made to childless women through interviews, research, and her own personal experience. Schaer embroidered these comments with red thread (like a scarlet letter) onto pristine white baby garments, and she worked on this series while commuting between Columbia College in Chicago, where she worked, and Brooklyn, where she lived. She often found herself in conversation with women who responded to her work:

Often, I chatted with women while working on the embroidery pieces, which are very portable, as I commuted to and from my teaching position at Columbia College Chicago. The responses I got were very strong. Many women, often those with children, shared with me their own stories about having felt trapped or seduced by the myth of “having it all.” Others told me about the pressures they experienced to have children before they had children, from family members and others in their communities. Lately, more gay and lesbian friends have spoken with me about the recent pressure they have felt to have children. (“Babies (Not) On Board”)

Schaer’s method of researching “*Babies (Not) On Board*” by sharing her experiences with women while commuting harks back to the early days of feminist art when consciousness raising informed artmaking practices, although infertility was never an issue for women artists, who viewed having children as something separate from being an artist. The material for much of the feminist art work in the early 1970s came from consciousness-raising sessions. At CalArts (California Institute for the Arts in Valencia) and then for the Woman’s Building, which was founded as an alternative feminist art center and school in downtown Los Angeles in 1973, Judy Chicago, who was the pioneer of feminist art education, encouraged her students to recognize that problems they had dismissed as personal were, in fact, the result of patriarchal ideology. Infertility was not really considered an issue, particularly since Chicago had chosen not to have children. Menstruation, abuse, rape, female bonding, feminine despondency, and entrapment figured much more prominently in second wave feminist art than the role of the mother. In fact, at this point in time, being a feminist artist meant actively refusing to have children, even as the feminist art movement embraced a wide variety of female experiences. Laura Silagi, who had moved to Los Angeles to study at the Feminist Studio Workshop, the educational component of the Los Angeles Woman’s Building that was founded by Chicago, along with art historian Arlene Raven and graphic designer Sheila de Bretteville, was shocked to discover that children were not welcome at this feminist institution (Chernick and Klein, 1). Along with Helen Million Ruby, who was told by Chicago that woman artists were expected to not have children, Silagi founded the collective Mother Art, whose first project was to

make playground equipment for the children who came to the Woman's Building (Chernick and Klein).

In the early 1970s, feminists and feminist artists did not openly lament their infertility, since enslavement to the ideological demands of the biological, heterosexual, and patriarchal construction of the family was viewed by many feminists as a large part of the problem. Thanks to the feminist art movement, women artists slowly began to break the art world's glass ceiling and have their work included in major museums, biennales, and art galleries. Almost none of these women had children, or if they did, they kept that aspect of their life hidden. In 1992, almost twenty years after Silagi and Million Ruby created a Woman's Building playground for their children, Susan Bee and Mira Schor edited an issue of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* on the topic of motherhood, art, and artists. They approached a diverse group of artists and asked them how the experience of motherhood had affected their work. Many artists were overjoyed to be asked to contribute. A small but significant minority were not overjoyed, however. The editors noted in their introduction that "more than one artist wondered how we'd found out that she *had* a child, so separate had children been kept from the artworld" (Bee and Schor 200).

In the antichild environment of the art world, Schaer's embroidered white christening dresses, pinafores, smocks, onesies, and shirts and shorts seem out of place. And, indeed, these are not objects made with art world success in mind; rather, they are objects made for a community of women who understand the pain that comes with being told that "childless women lack an essential humanity" or from reading embroidered on a pale baby blue coverall that "you may not have kids and not care about the future of our planet, but I do, so recycle." These comments are so insensitive and boorish that it seems as though they must have been made in the 1950s, prior to second-wave feminism. Yet these comments were made quite recently to Schaer and to the women that she interviewed. Sociologist Gail Letherby has argued that because motherhood is a public experience—affecting not just the woman but her partner, parents, relatives and friends—people have felt justified in giving advice about where, when, and how to have children. Noting that this advice implies that women who are either voluntarily or involuntarily childless have not reflected on the reasons for their childlessness, Letherby points out that "the decision not to have, or the

realisation that having may not be possible, may also cause some pain, and in this case advice will be not only unnecessary and unwanted but cruel” (527).

Picturing Childlessness

Two related photo series, *The Presence of Their Absence: The Portraits* and *The Presence of Their Absence: Self-Portraits*, grew out of Schaer’s desire to display the embroidered baby garments that comprised *Babies (Not) on Board* in a situation that at least approximated the actual context for which the clothing had been intended. For *The Portraits*, Schaer obtained four lifelike baby dolls and three toddler-sized mannequins (for the larger garments), and she arranged for professional studio portraits to be taken of these ersatz children, all wearing embroidered texts that contradicted their existence. A cut above the standard studio portraits of babies and toddlers, these images, which are housed in a red portfolio box with the title of the series and Schaer’s name embossed on the cover, are both beautifully crafted and eerily lifelike, particularly in the case of the realistic babies, which look like actual babies in the photographs. These dolls were made to be collected by adults rather than played with by children. It is, therefore, appropriate that Schaer has them model her *Babies (Not) On Board* clothing line—a one-of-a-kind outfit for a doll that looks like he or she is from a parallel but different reality. And, in fact, they are from a different reality: the world of the childless, but not by choice.

The *Portraits* are quite intimate: each portrait is overlaid with a piece of protective onionskin paper onto which one of the statements embroidered on the clothing has been printed. The *Self-Portraits*, on the other hand, are large scale prints in which Schaer, dressed in black clothing, poses with her doll family in a studio setting. Several of these portraits appear to be normal (i.e., those of Schaer cradling one of the realistic looking babies and those of Schaer standing in the centre of her children). Even these photographs are not quite right, however. Rather than looking solicitously or with concern at her children, Schaer stares straight ahead at the camera, playing the role of the artist and social commentator instead of the mother. In many of the photographs, Schaer does her best to make it clear that the dolls are inanimate objects, as she throws them around, walks away from them,

or holds them up under their arms as though they were a hunting trophy rather than a baby. Despite their frontal presentation and oversized format, the *Self-Portraits* are a performance—the divesting of the ideology of infertility, as well as the expectation that all women are mothers, or supposed to be mothers, whether or not that is the case.



Figure 1. Miriam Schaer, *The Presence of Their Absence #35*, 2015. Digital C print. Photo credit: Chelsea Shilling and Miriam Schaer. © Miriam Schaer

The Self-Portraits, then, are meant to indicate the arbitrary ideological construction of childhood and women’s roles in relationship to that construction. Nevertheless, they have been misread as simply being about Schaer’s own experience with fertility. Schaer included a guest book for comments and names at her 2013 solo exhibition *Babies (Not) On Board: The Last Prejudice*.² Most of the comments were supportive, but several visitors became angry at Schaer for critiquing the ideological construction of childlessness. One comment suggested that Schaer was being “rude” to people who could have children, while another opined that “most of the citizens on the planet don’t or are not really interested in your ‘inner struggle.’” As sociologists and theorists such as Margarete Sandelowski and Letherby have argued, the ideology of

infertility and childlessness is such that women who are either voluntarily or involuntarily childless are viewed as childlike themselves for refusing to grow up and take on the accepted role of the mother.

Even more insidious is the association between women's right to reproductive freedom and infertility. Women are actively encouraged to blame themselves for their infertility, which to this day remains a condition due to often multiple and unknown causes. Over thirty years earlier, Sandelowski demonstrated that "embedded within" the new urgency about infertility was "a renewed concern about women's autonomy and the reproductive price of women's expanded freedoms" (476), which is the price women pay for putting their own needs and desires ahead of the reproductive imperative (476). This ideological construction of infertility, expressed by the unknown commentator in Schaer's guest book, has been constructed as a "failure of volition" on the part of the woman trying to conceive—something was either done or not done to result in no children. What is more, this discourse is not specific to the late twentieth-century and the burgeoning field of ART. Sandelowski traces the suggestion that women were to blame for infertility back to the late nineteenth-century, just as increased public attention was being directed towards educational and occupational opportunities for women (482). The response to Schaer's work makes clear just how entrenched is the idea that infertility is the fault of the woman.

Challenging the Ideological Construct of Infertility

Schaer, however, refused to be wracked with guilt about her inability to conceive. She was angry at the way in which society expected all women to be mothers and also at the way society made childless women feel somehow less than adequate, especially if they were childless by choice. Letherby has shown how the ideology of infertility is bolstered by the discourses of social loss, biological identity, and medical hope, which "support the dominant social order with motherhood being every woman's goal" ("Other than Mother" 362). This is despite the fact that "motherhood is considered less appropriate for single women, divorced women, black women, disabled women, and women from lower socio-economic groups" ("Other than Mother" 362). In her 2015 artist's book *The Presence of Their Absence: Society's Bias Against Women*

Without Children, Schaer challenged an entrenched ideological construction that was particularly punishing to women who could not conceive. This slender book includes Schaer's story, along with quotations from a wide variety of experts about how infertility is understood and disparaged in various cultural contexts. Several of the images from *Self-Portraits* are either reproduced or restaged for the book, and there are two new series of photographs, both of them made using only the realistic looking dolls. The first series shows Schaer dressed entirely in black and playing with the dolls on the playground of South Loop Elementary School; she throws them in the air and poses them on playground equipment. The playground photos serve as the backdrop to Schaer's personal account of infertility (Fig 1). In the middle of the book is her statement for *Baby Not On Board* and is accompanied by the silhouettes of a baby-shaped book binder's board—similar to how candy boxes are fabricated—that when placed together form the letter M.

The second series of photographs, made again with the realistic dolls, show Schaer looking into the window of the American Girl Place in the Chicago Loop while holding one of the dolls. Here, Schaer confronts the ideology of mandatory motherhood and reproduction that permeates the developed and undeveloped worlds. The American Girl dolls, which are very expensive, are ostensibly made for children. As Schaer carries her baby and thinks about the Bitty Babies for sale at American Girl Place, one cannot help but be reminded of the incommensurability of Schaer, who by this time looks too old to be the biological mother of such a young baby, and the doll itself. Schaer deliberately performs the inappropriate mother cited above by Letherby, a mother that does not necessarily have a husband, has not given birth, and holds not a real child but only the facsimile of a child. The running narrative along the bottom of the pages shifts from Schaer's decision to cease ART treatments to a discussion of the astonishing prejudice that she and her husband experienced when people learned they were childless. This narrative is reinforced with quotations and sayings from different countries condemning infertile women. In the concluding pages, Schaer takes the leap and politicizes childlessness, noting that women's health clinics that perform abortions are subject to legal and extralegal actions. "Is domestic terrorism part of the price of deciding not to have a child?" Schaer asks (86).

Ida/Naomi and Reborn Babies

As she was completing *The Portraits*, Schaer showed the images to her eighty-nine-year-old mother Ida, a former maternity nurse who was just beginning to exhibit signs of dementia. Ida was very taken with the photographs of the dolls. Schaer purchased a doll for Ida, which Ida named Tabitha. Like the dolls in Schaer's *Portraits*, Tabitha looked a lot like a real baby. And Ida, who had always loved babies and small dogs, treated her as such (Schaer, *The Key Is in the Window*). Schaer began to photograph Ida, Tabitha, and herself, and put these photographs together into a portfolio that she titled *The Key Is in the Window* after Allen Ginsberg's poem *Kaddish*, written in honour of his mother Naomi Ginsberg, who suffered for most of her life from mental illness. When she passed away in 1956, Ginsberg was not present at her funeral and learned later that the Kaddish, or Jewish prayer for the dead, was not said because too few men were present. Two years later, Ginsberg performed the prayer for his mother with his friend Zev Putterman. The following day, he began writing *Kaddish* (Asher).

Like Ginsberg's *Kaddish*, Schaer's *The Key Is in the Window* is a prayer for the dead made for Ida, who passed away in December 2014 as Schaer was completing the series. In Ginsberg's *Kaddish*, the key in the window is Naomi's final destination as she moved through her troubled life, a way out of her life into another world:

Toward education marriage nervous breakdown, operation,
teaching school, and

learning to be mad, in a dream—what is this life?

Toward the Key in the window—and the great Key lays its head
of light on top of

Manhattan,

and over the floor, and lays down on the sidewalk—in a
single vast beam

The key was also in Naomi's advice to Ginsberg in a posthumous letter in which she responded to *Howl*: "The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window—I have the key—Get married Allen don't take drugs—the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window." Ida's life was nowhere near as troubled and dysfunctional as that of Naomi Ginsberg, whose delusional ravings and desire for

heterosexual normativity were translated by Ginsberg into an ecstatic vision of altered maternal consciousness. Ida was a good wife, a good mother, a good nurse, and a good housekeeper. Unlike Naomi, whose craziness in *Kaddish* was transcendent and mythological (as well as misdiagnosed), Ida's dementia was banal and sad—the endpoint of what had been a long and productive life. Ironically, the anchor to her previous existence was Tabitha, the doll that Ida was sure was Jewish. By the time that Schaer gifted Tabitha to Ida, Ida had had to relocate from Buffalo, NY, to an assisted living centre—Belmont Village—located in the outskirts of Chicago, where Schaer's sister and Ida's primary caretaker lived.

As Ida journeyed towards death, “that remedy all singers dream of,” as Ginsberg put it in *Kaddish*, Schaer channeled her sorrow into making her art, just as she had earlier when she realized that she was not going to have children. From the images of *The Key Is in the Window*, Schaer made the series *(W)hole Transformations* (2014-15) and the artist's book *(w)hole: A Life in Parts* (2017). For *(W)hole Transformations*, Schaer physically manipulated the photographs from *The Key Is in the Window*—stapling, sewing, lacing, and peeling the prints. The photo collages that resulted from this process were put back together and displayed in fancy frames much like the frames that Ida had used to display pictures of her family. The pictures contained within the frame are still Ida and her family, albeit a different family that included Tabitha. The frames become containing devices that hold together what remains of Ida Schaer; the fragmentation of the images is a reflection of Ida's increasingly fragmented reality. Schaer exhibited this series twice: *(w)hole* in Berlin in 2014, while Ida was still alive, and *(w)hole II* in 2015.³ By 2015, Ida had passed, and Schaer was grappling with how and what she remembered of Ida, and what Ida had remembered of her own life by the end. The framed pictures were installed on a dresser—an appropriate choice, as most of Ida's possessions from the life she had led in Buffalo, NY, were stored in her dresser drawers at the Belmont Village. Schaer's book, *(w)hole: A Life in Parts*, which was finished two years later, is therefore Schaer's attempt to remember who and what Ida had been prior to the onset of dementia. Overshadowing her memories of her mother as a young woman were the more recent memories of a mother who was no longer present, a mother who in extreme old age had become the child of both Schaer and her younger sister Susie.



Figure 2. Miriam Schaer, *Ida and Tabitha #39*, 2014. Digital C print.
© Miriam Schaer

The key, or link, to Ida's life is the doll Tabitha. Ida's response to Tabitha is both natural—Ida was both a mother and a baby nurse—and unnatural—Ida can no longer distinguish between an artificial doll and a real baby (Fig. 2). When Schaer decided to purchase this doll for her mother, she was probably not aware of the growing world and culture of reborns, dolls that are so realistic that it is sometimes difficult to tell them apart from living and breathing babies. A reborn doll is one that is hand crafted, painted, stuffed, and often scented so that they look, feel, and smell like a real infant. Costing anywhere from several hundred to several thousand dollars, reborns are avidly collected by mostly women, often as a way of filling a void. The tiny counterpart to the hyperreal sex dolls that are primarily “used” by men, the reborns have birth certificates and are “adopted” rather than sold. Women who have lost a child or who cannot conceive have purchased these reborn dolls as a means of consolation, as is the case with Mary Shallcross, a Canadian with a heart condition who is unable to carry a child. The subject of an article on reborns by Alexandra Shimo for the Canadian publication *Maclean's*, Shallcross, who takes her reborn doll Victoria out in public, purchased the doll at the suggestion of her mother (Shimo 49)

Women such as Shallcross, who desire their own child so much that they carry around a realistic doll, are viewed as unnatural and excessive if the comments posted after the article are any indication of public sentiment. And while there is a growing movement to gift the elderly who suffer from dementia with a hyper-real baby, that movement has been criticized as well. There is something rather creepy about these dolls, particularly those that, like Tabitha, sleep in perpetuity. Tabitha's eyes will never open, her sparse hair will never grow in, and yet, in the pictures from *The Key in the Window* it is clear from Ida's body language that the feel and look of Tabitha reignited her memory of what it was to be a mother and a maternity nurse. Ida folds over the doll, knowing instinctively how to hold her, what to say to her, and how to care for her. She coos over Tabitha along with Schaer, who carefully takes her from her mother and makes sure to support her head. According to Shimo, reborns are constructed so that their heads, like those of newborns, need support (48). When not called upon to be a baby, Tabitha rests on Ida's bed next to an antique doll of the kind that Ida and Schaer enjoyed collecting and refurbishing when Schaer was growing up.

Reborns are disturbing, but there is something slyly subversive about them as well—an ersatz performance of motherhood and maternity that is all the more compelling because it is done unself-consciously and even unintentionally. This could explain why there is a growing YouTube community of reborn videos, with popular YouTube series such as *LoveMyRebornBaby*, hosted by a nineteen-year-old woman from Denmark named Sabrina, which draws thousands of viewers. Like sex dolls, the reborn dolls make a lot of people very uncomfortable, even as they are used by some women to help grieve the loss of a child. Reborn dolls allow their users to remake or rewrite history, to become the mother that they have wanted to be, and to do so with an object that is more than real. There is an element of cosplay—one of the most popular subjects is cleaning up after a big pop event that always takes place off-screen—that points to the artificiality of these dolls, how they are used, and what they say about the pronatal ideological structure that seems to be a ubiquitous global phenomenon. It is telling that Schaer first performed maternity using these hyper-real dolls, and then, through Schaer's gift of the doll, Ida could perform, however imperfectly, who and what she used to be. In this context, it is significant that Schaer's nascent body of work is

concerned with an exploration of Ida's notebook, in which it is clear that Ida is trying to remember who she was, as she writes her name repeatedly and clearly in the pages of the notebook.

In foregrounding Ida's obsession with the doll, Schaer suggests that the institution of motherhood creates this obsession and then blames women for not being able to handle an inability to have children. Schaer also transforms her mother's dementia from the sad descent into forgetfulness and childlikeness into a more excessive kind of madness. To collect and use these dolls, as opposed to the antique dolls that Schaer and Ida collected and restored when Schaer was younger, is to become the unnatural mother, the mother without a child, and, at the same time, the mother driven mad due to her inability to reproduce. By invoking Ginsberg's mother, Schaer attempts to wrest Naomi and Ida away from the patriarchal construction of their madness and dementia via the agency of Tabitha, the tired doll.

Ginsberg's farewell to Naomi will no doubt resonate with Schaer, as she realizes her new project, a series of prints of Ida's bathrobe with her face superimposed on the image while Tabitha slumbers nearby: "There, rest. No more suffering for you. I know where you've gone, it's good" (*Kaddish*).

Endnotes

1. Schaer details these struggles in her two self-published books.
2. *Babies (Not) On Board: The Last Prejudice* was curated by Florence Alfano McEwin for Western Wyoming Community College, Rock Springs, WY.
3. *(w)hole II* was part of *Alternative Maternals-London*, part of the 2015 London Motherhood and Creative Practice Conference organized by Elena Marchevska and Valerie Walkerdine.

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