

The Fountains Foundation916
is an alternative exhibition space at
Columbia College Chicago located at
916 SWabash, 2nd Floor, Chicago, IL 60605

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Essay: Jessica Cochran

For more information:
<http://fountainsfoundation916.org/>

What's Your Baby?
Leave your answer at
<http://whatsyourbaby.tumblr.com/>

Special thanks to
The Center for Book and Paper Arts and
The Interdisciplinary Arts Department
Columbia College Chicago, Chicago, IL

Miriam Schaer
What's Your Baby?

The Fountains Foundation916



What's Your Baby?

Art, Anger and Childlessness

Babies (Not) on Board: The Last Prejudice is a series of works by Brooklyn and Chicago-based artist Miriam Schaer that “address the question of why women who choose maternal independence over child-rearing angers or offends so many people and institutions.” In order to generate text to be hand embroidered onto baby dresses, Schaer interviewed “childless women,” performed online research, and drew from her personal experiences. At the core of her investigation is this conundrum: why, as nontraditional family units gain broader acceptance in both secular and religious realms (as evidenced by the recent supreme court ruling on marriage equality) is the childless hetero woman the subject of prejudice, malice and antagonism? Can her project, for its amplification and isolation of specific language, help us decode and determine to what we can attribute this social pathology? Is it biology? Social expectations? Politics of power? Media?

Her installation for the Fountains Foundation 916, *What's Your Baby?* draws on this body of work. To enact this work as a participatory engagement, Schaer worked site-specifically in response to the very particular conditions of the location. Fountains Foundation 916 is an “alternative” art space oriented around four water fountains each with its own wall-mounted vanity mirror in the hallway of an academic building at Columbia College. As such, Schaer affixed four embroidered dresses (blue or white or pink in color) to the mirrors. The embroidered texts communicate hostility that is alarming. One dress reads, “*You may not have kids and may not care about the future of our planet - but I do - so recycle.*” On each mirror, which became the “head”, she placed the

words “*What's Your Baby?*” in plain black typeface. Thus prompted, viewers can write their answer onto a small piece of paper and place it into a ballot box affixed to the wall. A corresponding Tumblr site also collects responses.

The installation's components—the traditional cotton baby dresses, embroidered script, the mirror text—are simply made and modest, generally indexical to what was traditionally “women's

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work.” And though Schaer deploys this project from a gendered imaginary—specifically that of a woman artist who has dealt with the external ramifications of childlessness for years past the point of fertility—it asks for participation from anyone, regardless of sex, thus enacting an expansive notion of what exactly is “the maternal” and who it can belong to. The work is not about data visualization or analysis. It is, rather, about the moment of participation, the idea that the viewer reads, then acts, then leaves with an elevated consciousness—a newer way of being in the world.

Visually and materially, *What's Your Baby?* connects to broader currents in contemporary art—particularly those which deal with identity politics from a historically marginalized position. The absent body has been much theorized in the

last thirty years, in that the expressive potential of negative space has been used by artists metaphorically in order to articulate mortality or loss. In Schaer's installation, the garments hang loosely from each vanity mirror, the viewer's own face becoming something of a disembodied head to the body-less garment. The use of script is also notable in the assertion of the artist's own subjectivity: as historian Johanna Drucker suggests, “As a form of individual expression, writing is a somatically inflected sign, a production of the bodily self which seeks identity in an image of its own making ... to function simultaneously as an instance of personal and social expression.”¹

Perhaps most seemingly at odds, however, *What's Your Baby?* clearly connects purposefully to the history of the maternal in art. The baby garment has been used extensively by women trying to understand motherhood through the lens of artistic practice, perhaps most notably by Mary Kelly in *Postpartum Document*. But beyond aesthetics, what does a work that addresses the decision to pursue a life without children have in common ideologically with work about motherhood from a feminist perspective? In the introduction to their recent anthology *The M Word*², the authors assert that “maternal ambivalence is the psychic state which feminist mothering can happen.” In other words, in order for a woman to “mother” within the context of a feminist position, she must acknowledge and entertain her own complicated feelings of resistance towards motherhood itself. In carving out space for ambivalence, she rejects the paradigm of the selfless, perfect, sanctified mother figure. She understands the right of a woman to self-actualize. In this way, like Schaer, she aligns herself with the rights of women to mother what they want, how they want, if they want.

Perhaps most provocative is Schaer's decision to ask the question “What's your baby?” in the

¹ Johanna Drucker, *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), 59.

² Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein, *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* (Bradford: Deremeter Press, 2011), 13.



hallway of an art school—the Fountains Foundation 916 corridor is an artery that slices through different kinds of pedagogical space, from faculty offices to classrooms and student project spaces. More than any other field, the humanities have been attacked for being non-essential— as if the decision to pursue the career of an artist is frivolous, the act of a dilettante. For artists, however, the desire to pursue art is a political, personal, *life-giving* decision. In fact, one of the oddest of Schaer's culled statements “*Your child is the best artwork you have ever made. You don't need to make any other art*” is directed right at the artist, minimizing her creative labor and intellectual engagement as pointless. And so what is the answer to that?

To go on, to the best of our ability, tending to the fruits of our labor: the videos, the paintings, the essays, the poems, the sculptures, the drawings and the designs. After all, as Carol Becker wrote in 2010,³ “Art is a location — a designated imaginative space where freedom is experienced.” The freedom to have your baby and tend to it, whatever it might be.

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³ Carol Becker, “*Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art*” as accessed on AlternateRoots.org. Accessed August 20, 2013. <https://alternateroots.org/node/713>