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The Maternal in Drag: Towards a Mother-Driven Theory of Artistic Creation

Over the past few years, I have come to suspect that art history – and particularly social art history since the 1970s – harbors a deep and abiding ambivalence about the nature of artistic creation. Take, for instance, T. J. Clark's parenthetical aside to his own question: «What are the conditions of artistic creation? (Is that word ‹creation› allowable anyway? Should we substitute for it the notions of production or signification?)»[1] Here Clark's doubt is about the complicity of the term «creation» in what had become a staid conversation – art history as «manservant of the art market» and a «vehicle for reach-me-down notions of taste, order, and the good life».[2] Art history had become all too predictable and tame, with lofty concepts like «creativity» preventing us from asking those questions that seemed most urgent: «What are the artist's *resources*», Clark continues, «and what do we mean when we talk of an artist's materials – is it a matter, primarily, of technical resources, or pictorial tradition, or a repertory of ideas and the means to give them form?»[3]

Clark's doubt about creativity may have been cultivated by Linda Nochlin's staggering deconstruction of this same concept from an explicitly feminist position, which allowed her to frame the issue in even more precise terms: what she called art history's «mythologies of the divine creator» – a version of the artist as God-like, born of no one, whose creative omnipotence disavows social dependency.[4] Her response to Clark's questions would have been to emphasize the last integer in his triad, to argue: yes, the repertory of ideas matter, and they matter most insofar as they obscure the material basis of art's production and reception – ideas like artistic creation connoting a fiction of «the apparently miraculous, nondetermined, and asocial nature of artistic achievement».[5] Such ideas, even when called out, are not easily dispelled; they comprise «unquestioned, often unconscious, meta-historical premises» that are

> «intrinsic to a great deal of art-historical writing. It is no accident that the crucial question of the conditions *generally* productive of great art has so rarely been investigated, or that attempts to investigate such general problems have, until fairly recently, been dismissed as unscholarly, too broad, or the province of some other discipline, like sociology».[6]

This imagined exchange between Nochlin and Clark came to mind when the editors of this issue put forward the challenge of naming what art history's social questions might be today – some fifty years later. For as much as texts like these laid the groundwork for that project, they leave open the more foundational question of what creation means once we recognize both artist and artwork as socially determined. In this respect, the terms of artistic creation in early social art history may be said to have been less investigated than displaced – Clark's naming of ‹signification› and ‹production› sums up that displacement well (and sums up much art history that followed). To take up that investigation again, I propose, would mean

looking anew at the reproductive politics of artistic creation, namely the mechanisms by which our discipline has designated the difference between the creation of art and the creation of other forms, including those of living bodies. To put the same point differently: I think it matters greatly that in reflecting on writing her 1971 essay, Nochlin began with the observation that three «major events» led up to the beginnings of feminist art history: she organized the first class on *Women and Art* at Vassar College, she became a feminist, and she had a baby.[7]

In what follows, I will suggest that one of the urgent questions facing art history today is the place of motherhood in our discipline. I use this term following a genealogy established by Adrienne Rich, who, writing from the perspective of lesbian motherhood, drew our attention to how the very concept that would seem to be owned by women, was in fact not at all, and instead a central tool in patriarchal thought.[8] This basic but fundamental observation has allowed for a feminist theorization of this term, which is still largely unfamiliar, especially in art history, baring a handful of important exceptions. These include studies on the first-person driven, (auto-)biographical accounts of that experience – the day-to-day struggle of socializing another human being, of confronting the limits of your own ego structures, of trying to explain the irrationality of capitalist rationality in order to cultivate some kind of futurity in the face of one ‹crisis› after another – as well as investigations into motherhood's iconography and material culture, with profound implications for how we understand claims made on behalf of art's vitality and fecundity at moments of historical despair.[9] But even as the biographical and iconographical are significant, they are not my focus here; my concern instead is with how conceptions of motherhood have shaped certain categories within our discipline, not least of which is artistic creation. I thus approach the maternal less as that which we can see or hear, than as a kind of *«shadow archive»* or even canon-in-waiting of all of these experiences and more, which together have been marshalled by structures of power regulating what goes by the name of ‹Art› and what does not, what is deemed ‹productive› and what is ‹merely› reproductive labor.[10] What potential might motherhood as a shadow archive offer for reimagining the categories by which we understand artistic making?

At the very same moment that Nochlin and Clark were voicing skepticism about artistic creation, the term was being reappropriated by a figure who historically had been excluded from the making of culture: the «artist-mother». This is a designation I borrow from one of its earliest historians, Lisa Tickner, who uses it to describe an elected genealogy of affirmation rather than competition.[11] The artist-mother is not the artist who also happens to have a child, but the artist who *productively confuses* artmaking and motherhood. Consider the French artist Tania Mouraud, quoted in an essay on performance art by Lucy Lippard:

> «Women, who create, know what creation is. I started to paint after bringing my daughter into the world; the male argument which sees the maternal sensibility as an obstacle to creation seems inverse. On the contrary, the male's fixation on his sex, the fundamental fear which animates him of one day finding himself impotent, has completely falsified the very notion of art.»[12]

This is a comment indicative of its historical moment, made in the heady days of second-wave feminism when such confident pronouncements could still be claimed (women who create *know* what creation is). But I cite it nevertheless, as a vivid example of this productive confusion, of the staging of biological procreation *as* artistic creation. This nascent theory of (pro)creation would soon legitimate a

whole lineage of now canonical artworks by women who thematized their own motherhood (Lea Lublin, Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles to name only a fraction of the better-known examples). It culminated, too, in a survey sent out in the early 1990s by Susan Bee and Mira Shor to «a diverse group of women artists who have had children», in which they asked questions that reversed the centuries-old opposition between art and motherhood: «Did having children *enhance* your creativity or affect the direction of your work?»[13]

In recent years, such provocations have only intensified. Motherhood has emerged as an urgent topic across the visual arts and literature, with such works comprising a «countercanon», in which motherhood is not characterized as a decision made out of social expectations but «as something hard won, intellectually demanding, a form of creative labor».[14] Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle made the corporeal generativity of this characterization especially vivid when she described the maternal body as an «ancient 3D printer»: «I found being pregnant after graduate school highly creative. I mean you're literally growing a human in your body, you're a printer of sorts, an ancient 3D printer.»[15] Social reproduction theory has repositioned maternal care as a potentially anti-capitalist modality, further decoupling the category from individual actors to become a matter of «social maternity» – a concept that can be traced back at least to Weimar Germany.[16] In both contemporary artistic practice and scholarly research, the maternal has come to stand as a counter-model to neoliberalism, to «the myth and model of an attachment-free, always-mobile, fully self-funded and 24/7-available artist/creator.»[17]

In other words, at the very moment that art history as a discipline lost faith in the terms of creativity, a generation of artists insisted on precisely that wording, for it allowed them to overturn that characteristically modern opposition between the Mother and the social – or, as Alice Jardine paraphrased this Freudian paradigm: it is «the rejection of the mother that is the founding fantasy of the West».[18] Constitutive of the Subject, according to psychoanalytic theory, to reject the mother is to enter into language, into the symbolic, indeed, into any kind of culture at all. It not only distinguishes the social from the asocial, it is the principle that differentiates art from non-art and artists from non-artists. In Sarah Kofman's reading of Freud, especially his 1910 analysis of Leonardo da Vinci's art, she writes, «[w]hat men find charming in art is the illusion it gives them of being masters of creation and, by that very means, of procreation; the illusion of being able to dominate death and to be the *causa sui*».[19] Creativity in opposition to procreativity has been central in nominating these objects we call Art.

This is at least the most obdurate version of the account, the version in its purest form. Upon closer inspection, things are much murkier, especially when we attempt a history of the productive confusion between creativity and procreation. Giorgio Vasari, as one of art history's founding ‹fathers›, is as good a place to begin as any, given that part of what is at stake in this discussion is how the discipline of art history defines its objects and actors. We find, for instance, that Vasari first characterized *disegno* as a «mother» of the arts only to have it appear later in *The Lives* as their «father» – «a major conceptual divergence», according to Thomas Frangenberg, that prompts us to see this founding text as a multiplicity of voices, rather than the result of a singular authority.[20] The shift from ‹mother› to ‹father› is not a matter of semantics; nor can it be explained away by misogyny. It speaks instead of a profound ambivalence regarding the stability of authorship in the face of biological reproduction. Another example of this ambivalence can be found in a statement that Vasari made in reference to Sofonisba Anguissola: «If women know so well how to make living men, what marvel is it that

those who wish are also so well able to make them in painting?»[21] As Fredrika Jacobs has argued, this statement can be read in at least two ways: on the one hand, it can be read as an expression of admiration, of wonderment at a woman painter's ability to generate in paint what she can *potentially* generate in real life (given that Anguissola had no children). On the other hand, the statement can be read as belittlement of her achievement; that to paint lifelike pictures is a ‹marvel›, given that such an act is unnatural for the female sex, which is meant to generate life itself, not its representation. Considering that the highest praise afforded artists in the early modern period was to have «infuse[d] an image with life», the ambivalence of Vasari's statement is telling.[22] If this was the kind of praise that was *de rigueur* for male artists of that period, none of the thirty-five women artists recorded during Vasari's time, with the exception of Anguissola, received it. That she did at all marked her as the exception that proved the rule, the «alibi woman» passing as male in a man's world.[23]

Until now, art historians have been explaining this conundrum in terms of gender – of Anguissola's status as a woman artist, for instance. And they have operated with the tacit assumption that such explanations dispel the myths, as if the hold of an incantation could be broken by brute willpower. Mary Garrard confidently stated recently: «the masculinist claim that only males possess the powers of design and invention has proved as easy to deconstruct as the Aristotelean notion routinely invoked to support it, that males uniquely provide the spark of life in human generation».[24] But I am not so sure. Increasingly, I think those ‹Aristotelean notions› are more tenacious than we would like to believe. As David Summers has argued, «the history of form had been prepared for millennia to be a genealogy of fathers and sons» – importantly, not «men», but «fathers and sons» – that is, non-mothers and non-daughters.[25] Summers reminds us of how the Aristotelean dichotomy between form and matter was gendered in accordance with prevailing ideas about biological reproduction – a tradition in which we continue to operate: «Much of the metaphorical language – perhaps the fundamental metaphorical language – in which we discuss artistic invention is biological and, more specifically, sexual and reproductive in character (at the same time that reproduction may be characterized by analogy with art).»[26] Thus: the Latin *creare,* which means to produce, to beget, or bear; art historians use ‹reproductions›; a ‹patron› is a father. Author is from *auctor,* from *augere,* to increase, produce, or originate; while genius is from *gignere* (to grow) and related to *gens* (race, people).[27] But the metaphor goes deeper, and takes on unexpected dimensions. In Michelangelo, Summers argues, drawing on Panofsky, we have an artist who fashioned his own artistic prowess in terms of feminine generation: rejecting the language of ideas, he used the term *concetti* (concepts), a derivative of the verb to conceive, «as if the imagination were a matrix or womb».[28]

What is at stake here, I propose, is not necessarily Woman – defined as that negative integer in an oppositional structure of difference – so much as it is Mother. The latter points to something more specific than a structure of difference, to a definition of intellectual labor as indivisible from the body, and not only the body in general, but the body as the site of species regeneration, of biological determinism, and of instincts.[29] When we invoke ‹Mother›, instead of difference, we seem to be invoking a kind of potential, epistemological holism, with the power to overcome entrenched dichotomies of the Oedipal, Western world. As Susan Friedman wrote, a «maternal aesthetic» might even resolve binaries «between word and flesh, creativity and procreativity, mind and body» in an effort to «reconstitute woman's» – and perhaps not only woman's – «fragmented self into a (pro)creative whole».[30]

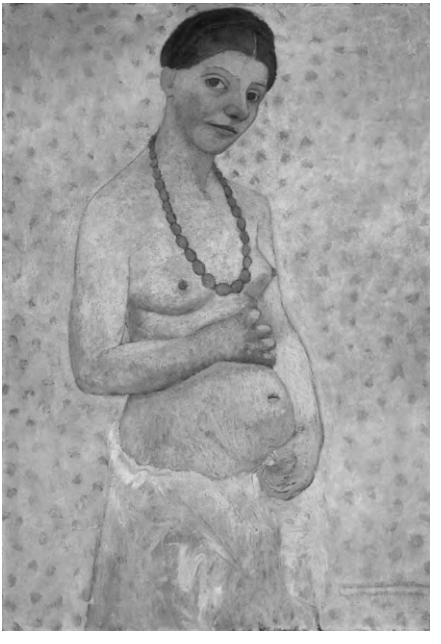
In that same essay, *Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor,* Friedman argues that the identity of the author (or artist) who uses metaphors drawing parallels between the production of an artwork and the gestation of human life matters, given that such metaphors historically have constituted the terrain of masculinized artistic production. Men and women «have encoded different concepts of creativity and procreativity into the metaphor itself» and that gender difference is further encoded by the readers – or in the case of the visual arts, the beholder – of any given work.[31] If that is the case, could one write a history of a *re*appropriation of the language of (pro)creativity that has shaped artistic generation? Would it be a history of subversion or one of accommodation, the form-matter dichotomy displaced but essentially preserved? Would there be moments when artistic practice challenged these discursive rules? Could we speak of ruptures to the patriarchal script that assigns the maternal a submissive and passive role, without necessarily essentializing the gender of the author (or beholder)? Might these ruptures have come into existence not (only) discursively but through artworks themselves, interventions that could not be recuperated by those terms?

The example of Michelangelo is one worth dwelling upon, precisely because it is so counter-intuitive. For it is his *Pietà* that embodies the «institution – not the fact – of motherhood», supplying that «floating notion that a woman pregnant is a woman calm in her fulfillment or, simply, a woman waiting».[32] When the *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica was attacked with a hammer in 1972, with the left arm of the Virgin Mary shattered, as well as her nose, left eye, and veil chipped, the event attracted the attention of a few prominent American feminists. Susan Griffin recalled, «I remember that on hearing of the despoiling of Michelangelo's *Pietà,* I was not displeased. Part of me wanted that serene, unlined, youthful face of the Madonna to be obliterated, or at least cracked, to show some sign of having lived a life that is not easy».[33] Could we think of this iconoclasm as an aesthetic act informed by feminism's critique of motherhood's patriarchal, archetypal iteration? And one comparable to a longer tradition of feminist undoings of the ur-image of motherhood, as represented by Renée Cox's *Yo Mama's Pietà* (fig. 1)? Keep in mind that this was also a historical moment in which

1 Renée Cox, *Yo Mama's Pietà*, 1994, Archival ink jet print on cotton rag, 10,2 × 10,2 cm

Michelangelo was an unlikely candidate for a proto-feminist art history, with Leo Steinberg urging us to see how his sculpture is unintelligible outside of sex, with sex here meaning «the full sexual cycle – courtship and brooding, fertility, coupling and birth, and, beyond birth, a sexual symbolization of parenthood».[34] These directions seem worth exploring if what we are after are more capacious definitions of motherhood's history and ideology.

Any answers to the questions I am posing would have to be able to account for Michelangelo's *concetti* as well as they could a work like Paula Modersohn-Becker's *Self-Portrait, Age 30* (fig. 2). The painting portrays the artist nude, staring out at the viewer, her belly swollen as if with child – or at least this is how it appeared to her contemporary viewers, including the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. As is well known, Modersohn-Becker was not pregnant at the time; a few months earlier, she had left her husband for Paris, abandoning their unconsummated marriage of five years. The inscription she made on the work reads: «I painted this, at age 30, on my sixth wedding day. P. B.», that is, on her fifth wedding anniversary, May 25, 1906. After consulting a lawyer about divorce, she expressed doubt about continuing to use her married name, writing to Rilke: «And now I don't even know how I should sign my name. I am not Modersohn and I am also not Paula Becker any more. I am I […]».[35] The assertion echoes Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar on the Romantic poets' use of the childbirth metaphor to express «the virile generative force which echoes ‹the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM› […]».[36] Rejecting the more conventional, Rilke-driven interpretation of *Self-Portrait* as prescient of the artist's actual pregnancy a year later and her own death three weeks after giving birth, Diane Radycki suggests we read this painting not in terms of the representation of pregnancy (or pregnancy as death-in-coming, as Rilke does) but as an assertion of artistic prowess, made during the artist's «spring of artistic fecundity».[37] And, to go one step further, if Michelangelo was the first male artist to appropriate the maternal, *pace* Steinberg and Summers, Modersohn-Becker's fabricated pregnant self may be the first appropriation by a woman artist, a re-appropriation of the childbirth metaphor by an author historically excluded from that role. The artistic maternal in drag.



2 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait, Age 30, 6th Wedding Day*, 25 May 1906, tempera on cardboard, 101,8 × 70,2 cm, Kunstsammlung Böttcherstrasse / Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum, Bremen

Notes

1 T. J. Clark, The Conditions of Artistic Creation, in: *Times Literary Supplement,* 24 May 1974, p. 561–562, here p. 561.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.; italics in original.
4 Linda Nochlin, Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? (1971), in: ibid., *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays,* New York 1988, p. 145–178, here p. 158.
5 Ibid, p. 155.
6 Ibid, p. 153; italics in original.
7 Linda Nochlin, Starting from Scratch. The Beginnings of Feminist Art History (1994), in: ibid., *Women Artists. The Linda Nochlin Reader,* ed. by Maura Reilly, London 2020, p. 188–199, here p. 188.
8 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), New York 1995. Rich distinguishes between «two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: 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» (p. 13, italics in original).
9 Anne M. Wagner, *Mother Stone. The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture,* New Haven 2005. See also Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy,* New Haven 1999; and Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal,* Minneapolis 2009.
10 Allan Sekula, The Body and the Archive, in: *October,* 1986, Vol. 39, p. 3–64, here p. 10.
11 Lisa Tickner, Mediating Generation. The Mother-Daughter Plot, in: *Women Artists at the Millennium,* ed. by Carol Armstrong a. Catherine de Zegher, Cambridge 2006, p. 85–120, here p. 91.
12 Lucy Lippard, The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth. European and American Women's Body Art, in: ibid., *From the Center. Feminist Essays on Women's Art,* New York 1976, p. 121–138, here p. 134.
13 Emma Amos et al., On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie (1992), in: *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory and Criticism,* ed. by Susan Bee a. Mira Shor, Durham 2000, p. 252–302; here p. 252, italics added. A more recent survey was conducted in April 2020; see Hetti Judah, Full, Messy and Beautiful, in: *Representation of Female Artists in Britain during 2019,* ed. by Kate McMillan and published by the Freelands Foundation, London 2020, available online: https://freelandsfoundation.imgix.net/documents/Representation-of-female-artists-2019-Clickable.pdf, last accessed on 1 February 2022. My thanks to Kathrin Rottmann for this reference.
14 Lauren Elkin, Why All the Books About Motherhood?, in: *The Paris Review,* 17 July 2008, in: https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/07/17/why-all-the-books-about-motherhood/, last accessed on 1 November 2021.
15 Hinkle, interviewed in the episode *Artist and Mother* (56 min) as part of the television series *Artbound,* broadcast by KCET and available online: https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/episodes/artist-and-mother, last accessed on 1 November 2021.
16 See, for instance, *Social Reproduction Theory,* ed. by Tithi Bhattacharya, London 2017; as well as Fiona Giles, Towards Social Maternity. Where's the Mother? Stories from a Transgender Dad as a Case Study of Human Milk Sharing, in: *Bioethics Beyond Altruism. Donating and Transforming Human Biological Materials,* ed. by Rhonda M. Shaw, London 2017, p. 291–318. The scholarship on social maternity in Weimar Germany is too vast to cite here, but a central text is *Die Künsterlin* (1919) by Lu Märten, a figure increasingly cited as anticipating feminist accounts of labor and care-work.
17 Leah Sandals, A Year in Motherhood, in: *Canadian Art,* 24 December 2018, https://canadianart.ca/features/a-year-in-motherhood/, last accessed on 15 November 2021.
18 Alice A. Jardine, *Gynesis. Configurations of Women and Modernity,* Ithaca 1985, p. 116.
19 Sarah Kofman, *The Childhood of Art. An Interpretation of Freud's Aesthetics,* trans. Winifred Woodhull, New York 1988, p. 171.
20 Thomas Frangenberg, Bartoli, Giambullari and the Prefaces to Vasari's *Lives* (1550), in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* 2002, Vol. 65, p. 244–258, here p. 253. More recently, it has been argued that the shift to «father» was initiated by Vincenzo Borghini; see Stefano Pierguidi, Vasari, Borghini, and the Merits of Drawing from Life, in: *Master Drawings,* 2011, Vol. 49, No. 2, p. 171–174, here p. 172. See, too, Ulrich Pfisterer, «Vater Disegno» beim «Vater der Kunstgeschichte»? Verwandlungen von Vasaris Personifikation der Zeichnung, in: *Vasari als Paradigma. Rezeption, Kritik, Perspektiven,* ed. by Fabian Jonietz a. Alessandro Nova, Venice 2016, p. 207–224. Thank you to Gert Blum and to Léa Kuhn for pointing me in this direction.
21 «Ma se le donne si bene sanno fare gli uomini vivi, che maraviglia che guelle che vogliono sappiano anco fargli si bene dipinti?» Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori,* ed. by Gaetano Milanesi, 9 Vols., Florence 1906, Vol. 6, p. 502; cited and translated in Fredrika H. Jacobs, Woman's Capacity to Create. The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguis-

sola, in: *Renaissance Quarterly,* 1994, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 74–101, here p. 78.

22 Ibid.

23 Maike Christadler, *Kreativität und Geschlecht. Giorgio Vasaris «Vite» und Sofonisba Anguissolas Selbstbilder,* Berlin 2000, p. 12.

24 Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622. The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity,* Berkeley 2001, p. 7.

25 David Summers, Form and Gender, in: *New Literary History,* 1993, Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 243–271, here p. 265.

26 Ibid, p. 249.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid, p. 245–247.

29 Consider Hans Hildebrandt arguing for the «maternal instinct» as an answer to why the artistic production of women must be differentiated from that of men; in: ibid., *Die Frau als Künstlerin,* Berlin 1928, p. 12.

30 Susan Stanford Friedman, Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor. Gender Difference in Literary Discourse, in: *Feminist Studies,* 1987, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 49–82, here p. 51 and p. 75.

31 Ibid, p. 50.

32 Rich 1995 (as Note 8), p. 39.

33 Susan Griffin, Feminism and Motherhood (1974), in: *Mother Reader. Essential Writings on Motherhood,* ed. by Moyra Davey, New York 2001, p. 33–45, here p. 36. See also John J. Teunissen and Evelyn J. Hinz, The Attack on the Pietà. An Archetypal Analysis, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* 1974, Vol. 33, No. 1, p. 43–50, which, though not explicitly feminist, argues along those lines, closing with the claim that «the incident is less evidence of the unnaturalness of the act than evidence of the unnatural character of our concept of what is natural» (p. 50).

34 Leo Steinberg, The Metaphors of Love and Birth in Michelangelo's *Pietàs* (1970), in: ibid., *Michelangelo's Sculpture. Selected Essays,* ed. by Sheila Schwartz, Chicago 2018, p. 1–57, here p. 28.

35 Paula Modersohn-Becker to Rainer Maria Rilke, cited in Diane Radycki, «Pictures of Flesh». Modersohn-Becker and the Nude, in: *Woman's Art Journal,* 2009, Vol. 30, No. 2, p. 3–14, here p. 11.

36 Sandra M. Gilbert a. Susan Gubar, The *Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* New Haven 1984, p. 5.

37 Radycki 2009 (as Note 35), p. 12.