

Lines of Pain: Webs of Connection

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In her research into the re-engagement with the fairy tale in contemporary art since 2000, art historian Aikaterini Tsola argues that artists who are women use the elements of well-known tales not as the source for narrative or iconography. They use the fairy tale as an 'imaginative space'.

Thus the expanded forms of contemporary visual art, aided by digital media, have become a means to access dangerous, disturbing, and phantasmatic dimensions of feminine subjectivity at the intersection of socio-cultural conventions about women and girls and the psycho-symbolic formations of gender and sexuality in which the mother or older woman plays an often sinister role. Linking the fairy tale with the surreal, Japanese artist Miwa Yanagi, for instance, uses masked players in staged photo-scenarios to invert the hierarchy of power in fairy tales. Gretel bites the hand of the imprisoned witch or Sleeping Beauty uses the spindle to stab the old woman at the spinning wheel. Yanagi seems to suggest that there is a young girl in every old woman and vice-versa.

Alice Anderson, already endowed by chance with a name so deeply associated with very complex social and sexual parables, participates in this radical reclamation and transformation of the imaginative space of the fantastic tale. Yet her practice does not involve any of the tactics we see in this area of work: reversal or the digitized surreal. Its tone is much harder to fathom, its imagination more surprising, its aesthetics more carefully calibrated to generate unsettlement and ambiguity and self-questioning.

I have to admit, from the start, that it has been difficult for me to write about the work of Alice Anderson, compelling and fascinating as it is. Much of my own work explores the aching pain of perennial maternal loss. Hers deals with rage and violence within the mother/daughter relation that, in *The Doll's Day*, concludes with the 'blinding', decapitation and mutilation of dolls representing the mother and father. Alice Anderson's works solicit a Kleinian understanding of the intense passions of the rageous and paranoid infant towards the powerful and threatening mother, whereas my psychoanalytical inclinations draw me towards the matrixial theory of Bracha L Ettinger.

Ettinger modifies the predominantly negative place of the mother and the maternal in classical psychoanalytical theory and practice.

Thus the tenor of Alice Anderson's films and installations is profoundly challenging to me, even while I welcome its daring in creating exquisite scenarios for psychic pain and its mirroring retort in imagined violence and retribution. In theorizing the specificities of feminine subjectivity, Julia Kristeva has written insightfully about the predicament of those feminine subjects for whom a sense of being violated by the world reverses into being a possessed agent of violence against that same world. This is how Kristeva psychoanalytically explains the phenomenon of the woman terrorist.

Alice Anderson, however, is not acting out pain: through film, drawing, sculpture and installation, she creates scenarios through which alter-egos, often played by herself in various costumes, or acted by a cast of equally red-haired actors, or projected through a doll-like replica or herself acting as if she were a doll, performatively and fictively explore the hurt and distrust, powerlessness and rage of the girl-child in a world bounded by controlling others in often baroque places of domestic confinement where architecture also often doubles as the body.

Like so many feminist psychoanalytical theorists, Ettinger argues that the mother/daughter relation has been left in dereliction and worse by the masculinism in Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytical theory and practice. In order to relieve the real and emotional violence that disfigures actual mother/daughter relations, Ettinger argues that psychoanalysis has failed to acknowledge elements of psychic life relevant to all subjects, but critical above all to feminine subjectivity, that arise from the shared prenatal/prematernal zone she names the Matrixial. In a recent article on primal mother-fantasies, Ettinger innovatively identifies as primal fantasies (fantasies generated to explain fundamental enigmas confronting the human infant) the common complaints made by daughters against the mother: that she is too much—devouring and suffocating; that she is too little— withholding, insufficiently feeding or loving and that she is abandoning.

Reading these recurrent accusations against the mother as primal fantasies, rather than as the real failures of actual mothers—good-enough or not—would mean that the intensity of the feelings and fears of the child can be relieved by understanding that fantasies are a particular way the child attempts to make sense of a bewildering and ambiguous relation to the world in which they are dependent on parental figures. ‘The father does not really want to kill you’, says the analyst to the Oedipally paranoid boy, ‘it is a fantasy that expresses your anxiety, fear and jealousy.’ Hence the child is freed from anxiety and able to integrate a paternal figure as authority but also as a loving support. ‘My mother is too distant or too demanding. She never fed me enough, or she suffocates me, or she abandons me’, says the girl-child. If the analyst does not corroborate that these feelings are elements of a fantasy, then the actual mother becomes the object of real ‘acting out’ of rage and envy, with catastrophic consequences for the mother/daughter relation which will not be able to move beyond the inevitable infantile feelings that the world has failed to nourish me, or that the world is too much for me to manage, or that I was abandoned.

I suggest that the psychic foundations for such fantasies of too much or too little mothering and abandonment lie, in fact, in the shock of our being born, that is being torn from the prenatal/prematernal Matrix in which all human beings sojourned for so many months in a living, sensing, proto-psychological state of severality, a state of perpetually being contained, rocked, nourished and stimulated by an unknown other, while being protected from the co-emergent partner-in-difference by a shared borderspace that could also be a shared, mediating threshold. (The italicised phrases are Ettingerian technical terms).

Birth precipitates the human child from this specific matrixial web of co-emergence and proximity-in-distance (nothing to do with fusion and symbiosis) into the enigmas of intersubjective encounters that instigate the formation of the psyche proper. The psyche emerges then as the mechanism for digesting, translating and metabolising the complexity of exposure of the postnatal infant to the perplexing force of the adults' unconscious and adult sexualities which impact upon it as a primary enigmas. This is a structural condition of human subjectivity.

The structural vulnerability of the traumatically de-matrixialised, post-natal infant, expelled into the challenging novelties of intersubjective relations with adult figures around whom are subsequently woven fantasies based on the intense and often violent passions of the non-linguistic baby oscillating between states of impotent rage and somnolent bliss, feeds into the particular narratives of individual family histories.

Writing of Alice Anderson, who identifies a familial history as a reference point for her work, art critic Sarah Kent mentions the work of Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) who frequently declared that her childhood never lost its magic and that memories remained the deep source of much of her work. In 1982 she refined this general statement to make explicit a particularly traumatic situation, which inspired a troubling rage that she never transcended.

The situation involved her father's introduction into his household of an Englishwoman who was to be his daughter's nanny—her second mother—but who was in fact installed as his long-term mistress, corrupting the child's sense of care for herself with knowledge of her father's sexuality and Sadie's 'betrayal' of her and her mother. The psychologically chaotic effects of such a precocious exposure to adult sexualities, 'out of place' and unveiled instead of remaining inside the primal fantasmatic scenario of the parental bed, clearly troubled the pre-pubescent, but perspicacious Louise Bourgeois in ways that did not, however become fully accessible to her until she acquired a psychoanalytical vocabulary from being in Kleinian analysis as an adult and studying Melanie Klein on child psychology in order to understand and hence to metaphorize in artistic practice the violence of her rage, envy and sense of betrayal and abandonment with its associated desire to take revenge by cutting, destroying and consuming the offending father; the figure of patriarchal masculinity.

The disordering of the usually prolonged feminine Oedipal process, which often revives in renewed father/daughter attachment in the period of early puberty, by the overt presence of the other woman, chosen and desired, thus rendering the daughter undesirable, could indeed be understood as a very powerful psychological wounding. The danger has been, however, that because critics know the story, they read it literally into all that Louise Bourgeois has made. Biographical reductionism crushes the distance between what might come to be recognized as a psychic

motivation for art making and the actual processes and effects the artist knowingly created to restage and to process psychic wounding into artworks.

Alice Anderson allows the critics a brief biographical story to serve as a key to the preoccupations worked through her artwork. But it does not explain the works at all. Born to an intercultural, bilingual marriage between an English man and a French-Jewish mother from Algeria, the child was severed from her father and one of her two cultures at an early age. This outline is rich enough already to be suggestive and also to be permissive for many fabulations. It is suggestive since the primary question a child will pose is: where do I come from?

Our origins (primary but also cultural) produce the cushion for identity that goes beyond nationality and legal citizenship. This is related to a second mystery: how does the one (a child) come from two (sexes)? From this, Oedipal, question, will emerge a linguistically gendered and sexed speaking subject identified with the parent of one sex and hence aligned with one gender. But of course, such identification and alignment can also become culturally expanded through notions of language, culture, history, custom, class, ethnicity and so forth, creating other lines of splitting and dislocation. In the classic Freudian account, the girl's entry into (heterosexual) femininity is only explicable by means of arguing that the girl comes to hate and reject her mother for failing to provide her with a penis. This desirable and symbolic organ can only be accessed, therefore, indirectly by taking up the passive position (femininity) vis-à-vis the father through whom a penis- substitute—a baby—can be generated.

Deluded as this account of a formative penis-envy may seem, for it implies a degree of self-hatred and rejection of femininity on the part of a girl who must become feminine by this contorted route, many analysts, women as much as men, find plenty of evidence in their analysands' words and stories to support Freud's proposition. Ettinger again dissents. She argues that we have overlooked and not given recognition to a counter formation. The girl learns what it is to become a woman through a process of fascinace, a prolonged gazing at the maternal woman as sexual being, through which she learns about desire and desirability that affirms her sexuality rather than leaves her derelict and lacking. In elaborating this argument, Ettinger reminds us of both the case of 'Dora' a hysteric who spent hours gazing at Raphael's Madonna in Dresden, and or Marguerite Duras' novel *The Ravishment of Lol V. Stein*.

I have introduced Ettinger's matrixial intervention on the occasion of the installation of work by Alice Anderson in the Freud Museum because I have been searching for a 'key' to my own anxieties when confronted by this powerful and always seductive body of work. Power and seduction are ambiguously played out across familial scenarios while both are features of the actual aesthetics of this body of work. I am suggesting that through its beguiling and disturbing formal processes of filmed manikins and scenarios, Anderson's work might be, in some degree, articulating a matrixial trauma: the wounding of the vulnerable girl-child by all too common events of marital separation and resultant emotional cultural estrangement. Our primary experience of the prenatal Matrixial web is precisely what renders us so susceptible to the other. The Matrixial web is a source from which our capacity for compassion grows but it equally creates a risk of another deeper hurt when later we feel torn or abused by another.

In her compelling autobiographical novel, *The Words to Say It*, the French Algerian novelist Marie Cardinal testifies to matrixial trauma. Cardinal was the second child of a recently bereaved mother, who had conceived this new baby just as she separated from her handsome, seductive but tubercular husband whose sickness and sexuality she had come to despise. So horrified was she to carry his child, that despite being a devout Catholic, she sought to abort the baby. The child clung on and was born, to live unloved, always negatively compared to a beloved, idealised but dead older sibling. In adulthood, she suffered a hysterical breakdown whose symptoms involved a dreadful sense of being pursued by a nameless monocular Thing, and perpetual menstrual bleeding. Fearing incarceration in an asylum and hence slipping into irreversible psychosis, Cardinal sought out a Freudian analyst. Declaring at the start that he was not interested in the bleeding, he asked his analysand to talk of anything else. The bleeding stopped. Cardinal began a long journey back through her pied-noir childhood in colonial Algeria, through maternal rejection and ambivalent paternal attachment, through attempted sexual assault, bourgeois marriage, childbearing and a career to the slow rediscovery of her own body, its orifices, and its pleasures and finally compassion for the disintegrating old woman, her dying mother. *Les mots pour le dire* (1975), translated as *The Words to Say It* in 1984 is about a rebirth of a woman through analysis. In the course of the analysis, Cardinal recalls several repressed memories: the cause of her Thing links back to her father snapping a photograph as she was peeing when a very small child; hence traumatic shame. Her bleeding she finally recognizes as the hysterical internalisation and re-enactment of her mother's death wish for her in utero indicating not only the transitivity of the mother-daughter relationship but something even deeper where the psychological fantasy of the mother becomes a real event in the body of her daughter.

Bourgeois and Cardinal provide possible reference points for the particularly French dimension of the family romance and its traumatic underside that also characterizes Alice Anderson's work. The aesthetic of Anderson's films evokes in me a memory of the colours, timing, and even acting styles of French post-war cinema, something between the menace of Chabrol and the ordinariness of Rohmer, as well as evoking older films written by the crime-writers Pierre Boileau and Pierre Ayraud, aka Thomas Narcejac whose work Hitchcock filmed as *Vertigo*. Timing, attention to the unsettling, surrealist potency of everyday objects filmed in isolated close-up, and the use of atmospheric architecture bear the hallmarks of the French nouvelle-vague cinema. Yet Anderson's aesthetic also seems to me profoundly and creatively English drawing on a Victorian tradition that is all too easy to invoke through her own naming: Alice.

In 2006, Alice Anderson had a mask of her own face and miniature doll with her own features created by the Madame Tussaud craftspeople. Both appear in her work. In addition she often plays parts in her work as if she is a doll, turning from child into a doll to please a cruel mother in *The Night I Became a Doll*. Animate to inanimate, and the use of a double, or her own proliferation across the many little girls, the little Alices (in Lewis Carroll's sense of a white-socked and banded shoes) evoke Freud's most perplexing essay on the aesthetic dimension of uncanniness. Freud showed how the German word *unheimlich* is in fact the same as its opposite *heimlich*, the homely or familiar that is already uncanny as the field of both infantile fantasies of omnipotence and animism and of dreads and terrors of castration.

On the one hand, Anderson's proliferating figures of little girls capable of terrible violence and retribution or self-destructive acts, alert us to a certain fixation on the pre-pubertal moments of powerless femininity dominated or even manipulated by parental adults. On the other hand, this fixation on and the claustrophobia of the family scenario alerts me, as a reader, to the telling absence of any other feminine figure who might lure the becoming female

child into transformative fascination through which she might otherwise learn to access her own feminine adulthood and sexuality. It also suggests how we might read, through its double function, the key element that will strike the visitor to the Freud Museum: hair.

In her recent installations, Alice Anderson has taken a distinguishing personal attribute, her red hair, which is inherited from her English father, and made it flow (Emured used 3000 meters of hair in the Marc Chagall Museum, 2008) or hang (Mother Web in the Royal Opera House, London, 2010) or weave through space (Birth I in Busan Biennale, Korea, 2010 and Synapses Rifleman Gallery, London, 2010) or drape (The Isolated Child at La Cinématèque française, 2011). Evoking thread, string, webs and weaving, hair is used by Alice Anderson in ways very different from Mona Hatoum's finely-spun and delicate balls of hair taken from a hairbrush and scattered amongst invisible filaments, woven into delicate grids, or Hannah Wilke's melancholy Brushstrokes, drawings made from the clumps of her hair that fell out during chemotherapy. Anderson's shining red-gold swathes and carpets are furthermore not at all Medusan—another indirect Freudian link. Memory becomes the spindle's prick for elaborating an 'imaginative space' that dares to stage the troubling truths of childhood intensities of fear, rage, hurt and anger.

I want to end with a personal but related anecdote. Many years ago, I was researching Elizabeth Siddall (1829-1862), the original red-headed Pre-Raphaelite artist, poet, and model. In one archive, I found a preserved coil of her copper-red hair. It had been taken from her grave when her husband Dante Gabriele Rossetti had exhumed a book of handwritten poems he had tossed into her coffin in his despair at the time of her sudden and unexplained death in 1862. Hair grows after death and Elizabeth Siddall's had twined itself around the slim red volume of his unpublished verse lying beside her head. The exposure to this coil of red hair was a strange encounter. Hair that had once graced the living beauty of a

creative woman now remained, vivid in its rich colour, as the sign of her having been beloved and being dead. The artistic project of Alice Anderson, who works in the charged spaces between fictionalised memory and aesthetic reformulation refutes any attempt at analytical interpretation. Her works remain elusive, suggestive, provocative, holding back secrets while seeding the burden of pain and vulnerability in tales of death, love and betrayal. I am unsettled by her beautifully crafted and stark images of the girl-child lost in a world of often dangerous or uncaring or self-preoccupied adults. Her aesthetics daringly stages the psychic conflict through a conjunction of French narrative cinematic tropes and Victorian poetry and painting, with a novel use of Rapunzel-like tresses, which may provide a thread through which to play with reconnection and transformation.