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Excremental Subjectivity

Presence, Absence, and Feces in Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*

A series of six "documents" that include a child's clothing, scribblings, utterances, and shit-stained diapers, Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document *(1972–1979) has long been considered an exemplary work about motherhood. The documentary and psychoanalytic process by which Kelly explores the changing nature of a mother's relationship to her child varies between the objective and subjective. This article explores* Documentation I: Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts of the Post-Partum Document—*a section in which Kelly documents the weaning process by recording the foods introduced and the nature of the child's bowel movements. Through close analysis, and in relation to psychoanalytic and childrearing literature, this article argues that these stained diaper liners act as indices of the child's presence and absence, thus becoming what Jacques Lacan would term, an* objet petit a *for the mother. Close examination of these liners reveals the slippage between what is present, implied, and absent. Through* Documentation I, *Kelly provides evidence for the ambiguous and amorphous process of weaning, thus exposing maternal anxieties.*

Introduction

Between 1972 and 1979, Mary Kelly created *Post-Partum Document*, a project that explores the changing relationship between mother and child through a series of six "documents" that ranged from the child's clothing, scribblings, utterances, and shit-stained diaper liners. The latter comprises the document titled *Documentation I: Analyzed Fecal Stains and Feeding Charts* (fig. 1), which particularly shocked viewers when placed on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, and garnered the newspaper headline "On

Show at ICA … Dirty Nappies!" (Bray). But these "dirty nappies" are not just scatological markings. On the liners Kelly includes records of feeding times and an analysis of the stains. Thus, as shocking as this project might have been, Kelly's work presents an analytical exploration of the child's psychosexual development and her own maternal anxiety brought on by this stage of childrearing. Through the use of the psychoanalytic theories of Freud, Lacan, and Winnicott, as well as the childrearing literature of Robert Sears and Benjamin Spock, this article argues that the mother's desire for her son is displayed by her analysis of symbols and indexical signs that the child leaves behind, and becomes the mother's *objet petit a*—the object, idea, or symbol that the subject seeks in the other. Ultimately, Kelly's project reveals how the demands of her maternal performance induce her own anal regression. In turn, this regression serves a means for the artist to confront her own maternal anxieties.

Weaning from the Breast

Documentation I consists of excrement-stained diaper liners, characterizations of the stain patterns, and the child's daily intake of food and liquid. Kelly uses twenty-eight samples of her son's feces from the month of February 1974—one corresponding to each day of the month, which was his sixth month of life. His age for this part of the project is not without meaning—this is the threshold of the Lacanian mirror stage. The mirror-stage is an important factor in this work, as it is the moment when the child recognizes himself as an "I." It is at this moment of self-realization that the child identifies as separate from his mother, which positions her in the role of the other and creates the first real moment of weaning (Lacan *Ecrits* 5-7). This symbolic and psychic weaning is coupled with the much more mundane act of introducing solid foods into the child's diet.

As such, integrally related to each of the documents is a series of diagrams and quasi-scientific analyses titled *Experimentum Mentis.* Each of these evaluates the process and progress of the section and elaborates on the premise of each document by incorporating Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis. The *Experimentum Mentis* for *Documentation I* is titled "Weaning from the Breast," which refers to this very act and the child's slowing dependence on the mother for sustenance. Lacan argues that this phase heightens the desire of the mother to regain the phallus, which was previously symbolized by the child. Kelly explains this moment as the following: "A significant discovery of absence not only for the child but also for the mother. In so far as it is real separation, can be secularized, it does not provoke a 'recognition' of castration, but it does rupture the symbiosis of the biologically determined

Figure 1. Mary Kelly, Post-Partum Document. The Complete Work *(1973-79), Installation View, 1998. Generali Foundation, Vienna, Austria. Photo: Werner Kaligofsky*

mother-child unit" (40). This rupture of the dyad, as Kelly recounts, causes similar effects of absence for both mother and child. Similarly, one may compare this statement to Winnicott's concept of the "good enough" mother who ceases to adapt to fulfill the infant's needs as the child learns to "deal with her failure" (14). Considering the rupture as a form of failure, it could be argued that the mother too fixates her focus on the feces, and her detailed, nearly controlling, accounting suggests her own regression to the anal stage of psychosexual development.

Feces and the Anal Stage

Freud develops his concept of the stages of psychosexual development in 1905, but would not focus on the anal stage until 1908 with his short paper, "Character and Anal Eroticism." In it he argues that the infant, finding pleasure in regions of the anus, would prolong defecation to increase his sexual excitement. This excitement causes certain traits of his character to become modified (*Freud Reader* 293-294). This paper marks the relationship between the body and its byproducts with erotic traits as well as the transition of the child from the oral stage to the anal stage of psychosexual development. Thus feces symbolize a growth in the child's psyche, and the consistency and patterns of the excrement

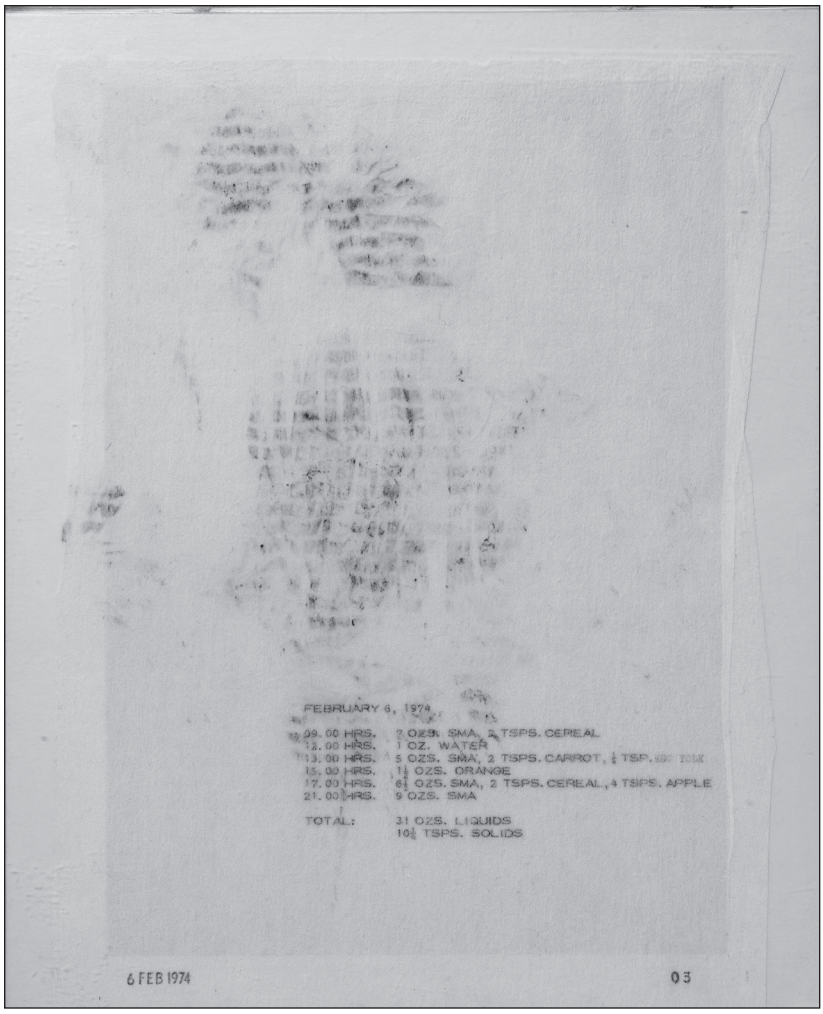

Figure 2. Mary Kelly. Post-Partum Document: Documentation I, Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts*, 1974, Perspex unit, white card, diaper linings, plastic, sheeting, paper, ink,7 units: 28 cm H x 35.5 cm W. Gallery Inventory #MKE131.02. © Generali Foundation Collection of Generali Foundation, Vienna.*

act as signifiers of his growing independence from his mother. Kelly's meticulous examination of feces in this work not only fixates this development, but it also focuses her maternal anxieties on signs that her child is still alive: feces are a signifier of living, of having normal bodily functions, and in the correct texture and consistency, of being healthy.

As with the anal stage, *Post-Partum Document* embodies many aspects of the *fort-da* game—the moment in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* when the

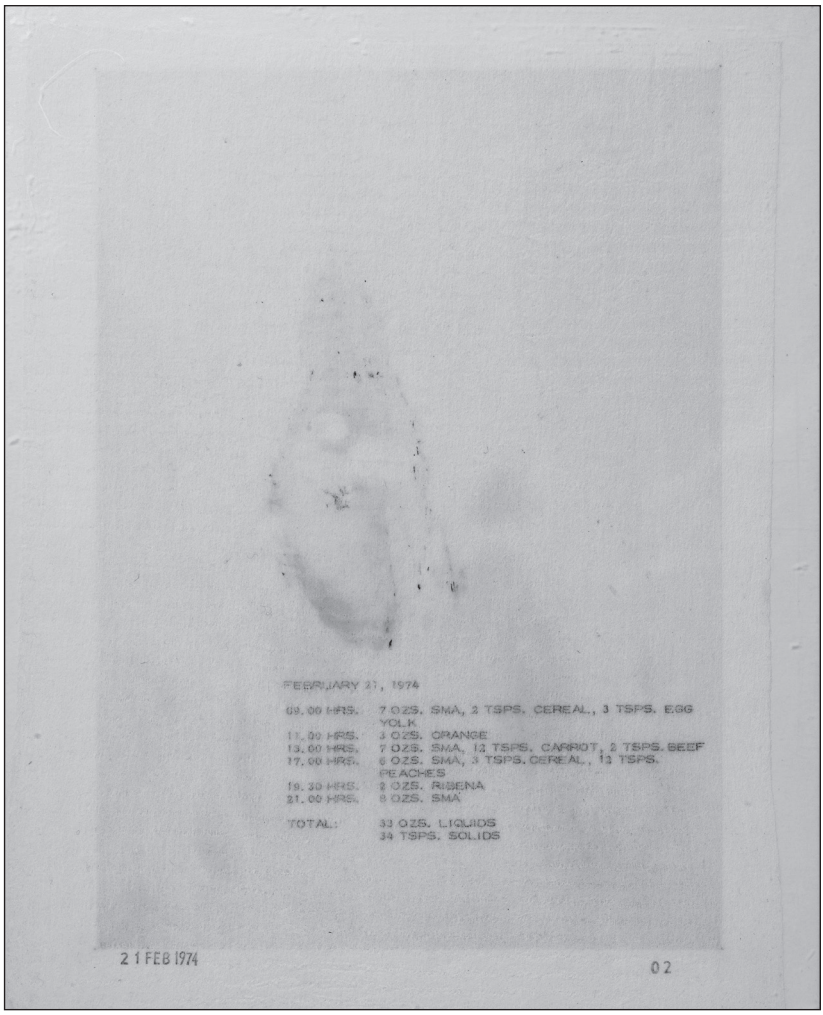

Figure 3. Mary Kelly. Post-Partum Document: Documentation I, Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts, *1974, Perspex unit, white card, diaper linings, plastic, sheeting, paper, ink, Each unit: 28 cm H x 35.5 cm W, Art Gallery of Ontario, Gift from the Junior Committee Fund, 1987, 87/46 © Mary Kelly.*

child, in an attempt to control his desire and fear of his mother leaving, plays with a wooden reel and displaces his feelings onto the object. In this scenario, the child takes the wooden reel attached to a string and hides the reel over a cot. As he does this the child emits a long-drawn-out "o-o-o-oh" that Freud asserts as signifying *fort* or "away." Next, the child pulls the string to reveal the toy and exclaims "o-o-o-oh" in joy of its appearance. Freud characterizes this act meaning *da* or "here." This game signifies the child's control of his mother's

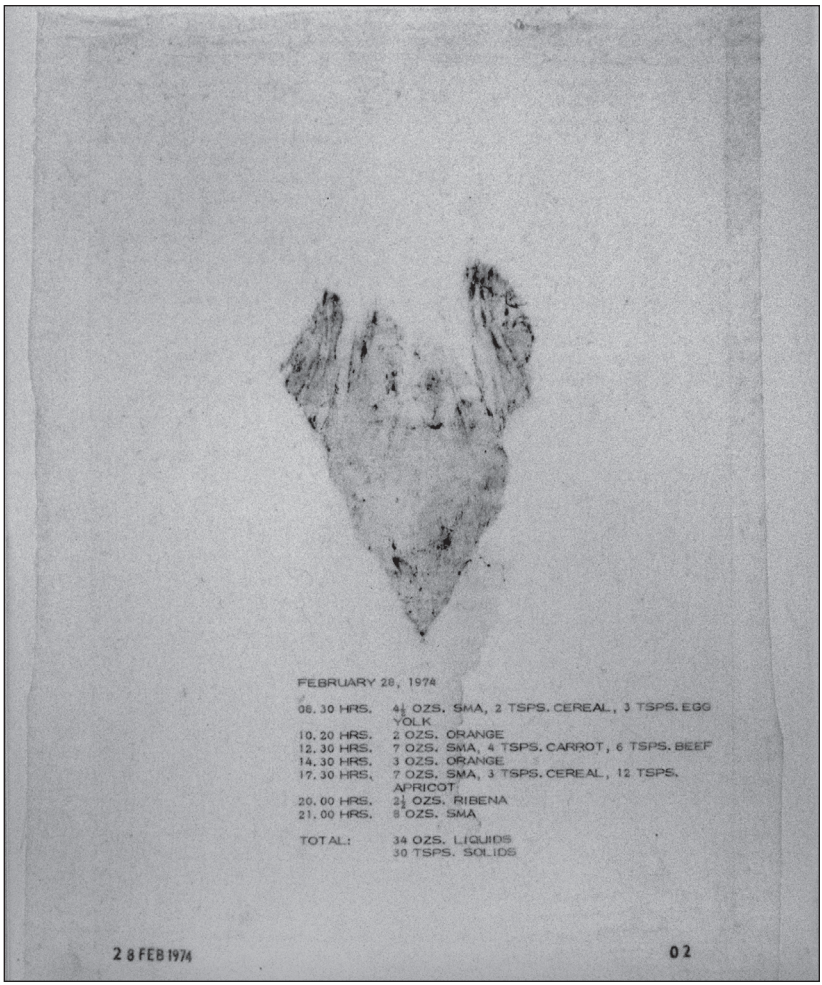

Figure 4. Mary Kelly. Post-Partum Document: Documentation I, Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts, *1974, Perspex unit, white card, diaper linings, plastic, sheeting, paper, ink, 7 units: 28 cm H x 35.5 cm W, Gallery Inventory #MKE131.02, © Generali Foundation, Collection of Generali Foundation, Vienna.*

disappearance, which Freud, speaking as the child states, "Yes, you [mother] can go, I don't want you, I am sending you away myself" (13-14). This game is in many ways part of the dialogue within *Post-Partum Document*—as the child gains control over his senses and eats solid food, the mother (and artist) negotiates her own kind of *fort-da* game as she desires to have the child be dependent on her. Yet the object in this game is the used diaper; the artist-mother takes the diapers, removes the liners, rinses them in the bathtub, and leaves them to dry in order to make her art.

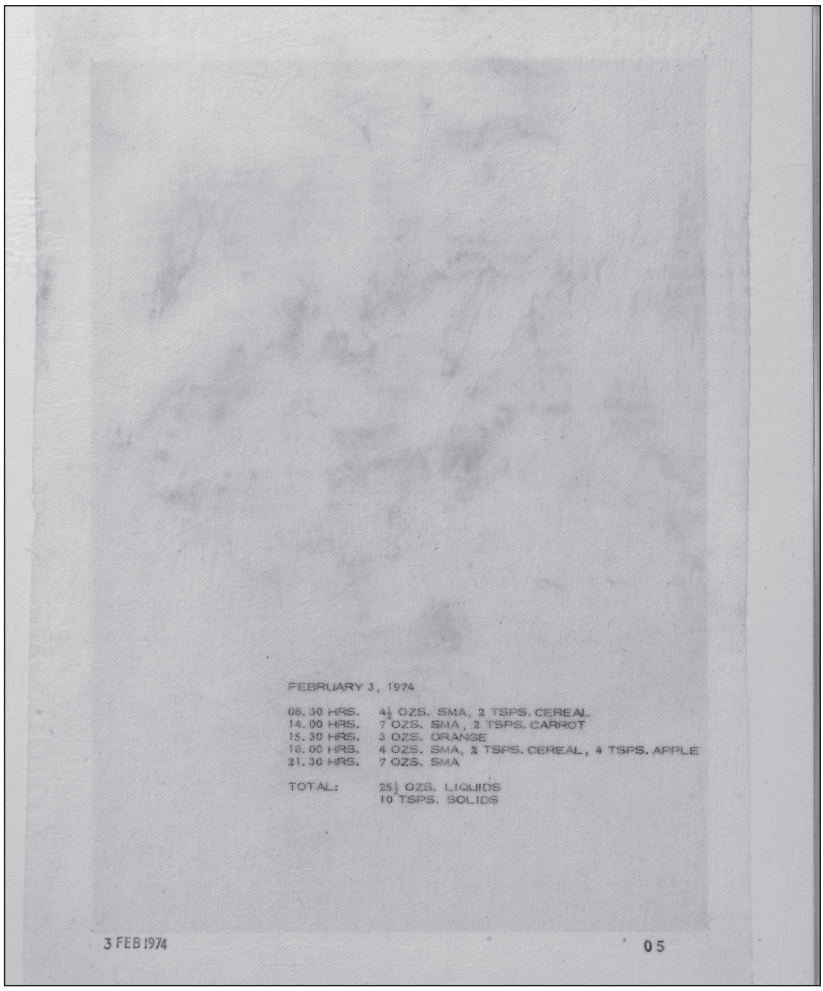

Figure 5. Mary Kelly. Post-Partum Document: Documentation I, Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts, *1974, Perspex unit, white card, diaper linings, plastic, sheeting, paper, ink, Each unit: 28 cm H x 35.5 cm W, Art Gallery of Ontario Gift from the Junior Committee Fund, 1987, 87/46, © Mary Kelly.*

The Art of Weaning

The relationship between mother and son is further broken through the new "decision and policy-making" that mothers must make when feeding her child (Sears 70). No longer just feeding from the breast, Kelly must decide what nutritional course her child's diet will take. The Laboratory of Human Development at Harvard University discussed this concept in a 1957 study (later published in Robert Sears's *Patterns of Child Rearing*). Sears elaborates:

"[The mother] must decide whether or not to breast-feed him; she must work out a schedule; she must select a time and a method for weaning him; she must introduce him to new foods and new methods of eating" (70). As an artist-mother, Kelly's decision to begin weaning her child in his sixth month is marked differently than other mothers: she meticulously records her son's feeding schedules and resulting excrement for three months. As previously noted, *Document I* illustrates the month of February—a month in which the child's body weight and consumption of solid foods rapidly changes.

Approaching the feeding process from a scientific and artistic perspective, Kelly notes when a new food item was introduced by typing the word in red ink rather than the standard black ink. As illustrated in the liner from 6 February 1974 (fig. 2), one can see that egg yolk was introduced to the child's diet relatively without any problem; Kelly records the nature of the feces to explore whether the foods caused problems for the child's bowels. Through this type of documentation, the dates that new foods were introduced are explicit. Also implicit are the records of how the child digested these items. Kelly characterizes the excrement as the following: (01) constipated, (02) normal, (03) nonhomogenous, (04) loose, and (05) diarrheal. As noted in figure 1, Kelly's son produced nonhomogenous stool. In the introduction to *Documentation I*, Kelly elaborates on how she formulated these fecal categories:

> The exact character of the feces of a normal infant will depend on:
>
> The kind of food and the completeness of digestion.
> The amount of putrefaction or fermentation.
> The amount of bile secreted.
> The amount of fat and water remaining unabsorbed. (9)

These classifications, while depending on general understandings of the feces and the digestive system, do not account for the greatest problem with these stains: a baby typically has between one to four (or more) bowel movements a day. Kelly only provides one liner per day and does not identify if this is the only feces produced for the day—an occurrence that would not be likely, as young children have several bowel movements per day.

Thus, the significance and immediate relationship of the text association with each sample is not as direct as originally suggested. What Kelly provides the viewer is a subjective sample of what is supposed to be an objective document. The viewer does not know if the child's fecal stains reflect all or part of the food and liquid consumed and, thus, exposes the slippage of this "document."

"Good Enough" Mother

This slippage marks the project with doubt. This doubt is reiterated by the final question posed by Kelly in *Post-Partum Document*: "What Am I Doing Wrong?" Kelly's question suggests the anxiety and fear mothers endure during this distinctive stage of childhood development, but it could also reflect a greater, deep-seated fear of failure. D.W. Winnicott calls this maternal failure as a "good enough" mother. The good enough mother, he writes, "is one who makes active adaptation to the infant's needs, an active adaption that gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration" (13). Thus, to truly fail, the mother must fail at a greater rate than the child's ability to adapt—this rate of failure becomes diagnosed in *Documentation I* through the categorization of the consistency and nature of the stains. Yet, to return to Kelly's question, the answer is two-fold: it questions her failure not only to tend to her child but also to meet the expectations set forth by popular childrearing literature.

Dr. Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (1946) is a prime example of this literature. Written with the aims of subsiding mothers' fears and helping them have confidence in their own judgments, *Baby and Child Care* became the canonical text on parenting. Dr. Spock, in turn, became the childcare specialist to which parents listened. Spock provided guidance on every dilemma that faced the mother. Feeding problems, general problems of infancy, constipation, diarrhea, inoculations, illness, and puberty development were just a few of the topics Spock discussed in his many books and popular magazine columns throughout the 1970s. Spock was one of the few authors of childcare books who became popular not only in the United States but in the United Kingdom as well—Kelly owned and referred to Spock's canonical text in another section of *Post-Partum Document*, noting that "Dr. Spock says [her son's stuttering] is due to 'mother's tenseness or father's discipline" (100).[1] This inclusion suggests Kelly read and perhaps even followed his popular parenting guidelines. Yet, perhaps more evident of Spock's influence is the process by which she introduced new food to her child—in small quantities and under her watchful eye. In February 1974, Kelly introduced to her son egg yolk, yogurt, beef, peaches, and apricots, and she documented their effect by characterizing his subsequent bowel movements—one was diarrheal, one constipated, six loose, eleven normal, and nine nonhomogenous. These records are evidence for both the ability of the child to digest the new food products as well as the mothering skill Kelly had in introducing the foods in relatively digestible amounts. This process is mindful, as Kelly notes, "you see [on] the stained liner whether or not it's gone down well, because it gets diagnosed" (Kelly and Carson 209). Yet as diagnosis of fecal matter informs the mother of what foods agree with

her child's digestive system, it also creates an analytical and, perhaps, obsessive form of mothering—which could indicate that Kelly's controlling account of the feces reflects a desire to manage her maternal anxiety as her symbiotic union with her child is ruptured.

Paradoxically, Sears and others would later argue that diaper changing is a rewarding time in a child and mother's life because it is at this early point when bowel movements are directly related to feeding and generate the attention and affection of the mother (105-106). As the mother performs the changing of the diaper, the genital region is cleaned and, as Freud argues, stimulated, which precipitates the anal state. Interpreting Freud, classicist Norman O. Brown argues that the child may use his feces as a gift, as property (possession), or as a method of committing aggression against another (191). By applying this notion to *Documentation I*, Kelly's maintenance of the stained diaper liners was, arguably, not only a means of analysis but also a form of affection, which serves as a symbol of the intimate relationship between mother and child. The preservation of feces or fecal stains may seem somewhat unusual to many mothers, but one could argue that this serves as one of the first gifts that a child provides his mother.[2]

The Author and the Artist-Mother

Providing childcare is a time consuming and laborious task, and in *Documentation I,* Kelly takes these travails of motherhood to a new level. Beside the actual feeding and diaper changing necessary, Kelly rinses the diaper liners so only a stain would remain. She then lets them dry out on the sides of the bathtub so they would be flat. She jokingly refers to this as "the artist making the 'print' and [having] herself photographed in the midst of the process" (Kelly and Carson 210). This is a striking piece of evidence, as the *Post-Partum Document* avoids figural representations of the mother, yet one sees Kelly's hands in this image. The claim to her authorship of the work is intonated, but this role is contested. Kelly is not truly the "author" of this print, as the stain is the byproduct and an index of the child, who is no longer functioning solely on the mother's breast milk. Yet this is complicated by the fact that Kelly is the one who takes the diapers. She removes the liners and rinses them to only reveal the excrement's stains. She is the one who analyses the stain, records the feeding times, and transfers this information onto the liners. And she will ultimately be the one who frames the liners to place them in the context of art. She thus indexes the actions of the mother and the artist in the process. Yet as Roland Barthes writes, it is the language, the text, that speaks and not the author (143). In the instance *Documentation I*, is it not the stain that speaks rather than the co-producers of Kelly and her child? But of what do these

brown marks speak? Do they speak of a healthy child, a sick child, of proper digestion, or of a good mother? Arguments could be made for each. As much as the child is the producer of the stain, Kelly, as the mother, determines which items are to be consumed; she functions as the authority for feeding times and amounts. Thus, she could be seen to author the child's bowel movement and, thus, his stains. However, she cannot control how the child's body digests and reacts to this food, and, therefore. it can also be argued that she functions as an indirect or secondary author.

This secondary nature of art creation is coupled with the distancing of the mother-child dyad. In this perspective, Kelly's meticulous documentation of food, amount, and time creates an almost simulacral relationship. As Jean Baudrillard argues, a simulacrum is everything that makes one lose touch with the real. It could be an object, thought, fantasy, or a person that makes one believe they are in the presence of the real, but they truly are not (169-187). Baudriallard's simulacra functions similarly to Lacan's *objet petit a*, in which the object serves as a symbol of the subject's desire, and the latter notion can be applied to Kelly's entire *Post-Partum Document*. The art work serves as an object that replaces Kelly's desire to maintain a primary physical relationship with her son, primarily through breastfeeding. However, as mentioned above, the meticulous recording of her child's diet and resulting excrement can be attributed to her mimicking, and to some degree, mocking of the descriptions of parenting conveyed by popular literature on childcare. In some of the more inflammatory texts, such as Dr. Marvin Gersh's *How to Raise a Child at Home in Your Spare Time*, Gersh projects onto first-time mothers, stating that they go through a period of "obsessional psychosis," in which the mother worries and has concern about every snort, loose stool, and cry (22). Kelly's careful documentation could be a play on this notion of "psychosis"—of being obsessed with every new food and bowel movement of her child and of being removed from reality. Indeed, Kelly would later remark that the process was "verging on a kind of psychosis," and it took her almost two years to be able to return to these notes and analyze them (Morgan and Kelly 23-24). This further suggests that the obsession with her child's fecal stains became a symbol of her own regression to the anal stage.

Feeding Patterns and Arbitrary Stains

Feeding facts are provided in liners from 21 February 1974 (fig. 3) and 28 February 1974 (fig. 4), but the marks are quite different for the so-called normal feces. In each, relatively the same amount of liquids and solids are consumed, and nothing is considered a new food. Thirty-three ounces of liquids and thirty-four teaspoons of solids were consumed on 21 February,

while thirty-four ounces of liquids, thirty teaspoons of solids, and thirty teaspoons of solids were ingested on 28 February. The stain on 28 February has greater angularity in shape and is darker in color than the 21 February stain, but what accounts for these differences is not clear. On 21 February, peaches were consumed, as opposed to apricots on the other date, and the viewer does not receive information about the child's daily activities or the time of the day that the stain was produced. Thus, these marks suggest an arbitrary range of what is considered "normal."

This arbitrariness of the stain becomes remarkable once other liners from the *Documentation* are considered. On 15 February 1974, a new food item was introduced: yogurt. Interestingly, the yogurt did not affect the child's digestion as Kelly characterizes the feces produced as normal. Kelly's stool characterizations are determined by a set of factors, the primary one being the "kind of food and completeness of digestion" (9). It seems that the yogurt was complimentary to the child's digestive system, as the stain is reminiscent of the 21 February 1974 stain in its organic, amorphous nature, and overall lightness. This stain could be included as a mark of her success as a mother—she, perhaps sarcastically, notes, "The normal feces is not only an index of the infant's health but also within the patriarchy it is appropriated as proof of the female's natural capacity for maternity and childcare" (41). In other words, as patriarchal society places the burden of child feeding and the changing of a child's diapers on the woman, it also affirms that maternal care is natural and done well if the child has normal bowel movements.

Although the stains for normal excrement vary in darkness and shape, there is only one sample of a constipated feces stain from 1 February 1974. This stain clearly invokes this characterization, as it is limited to a small strip and has a localized distribution. Darker at one end than the other, the excremental pattern is invoked. Interestingly, the foods the child ate—baby formula, cereal, carrot, orange, apple, and water—were not new items. The unexplained nature of this constipation is yet another one of the many mysteries of *Documentation I*.

The task of analyzing the fecal stains and making sound judgments based on them is not as simple as it may seem. On 3 February 1974, no amount of new food was introduced (fig. 5). The child ate the same food and almost the identical amount as the prior day. Nevertheless, he produced diarrheal excrement. According to Dr. Spock, diarrhea in children may occur in the first year or two because of sensitive intestines and if a baby's movements "have been good and suddenly turn loose, you should assume that he has an intestinal infection" (214). This infection may be due to microbes present in vegetables, cold germs, or due to other bacteria that do not affect adults. Therefore, just because the child does not consume anything new, many

other factors must be taken into consideration, which, again, undermines the very project Kelly has undertaken. To this effect, Kelly notes, "The lack of correlation between the nutritional data and the diarrheal stain undermines the ideological notion of 'natural capacity' and queries the expediency of the sexual division of labor through which the mother's secondary social status is confirmed" (41). In acknowledging the discrepancy between the diet of the child and his unpredictable bowel movements, Kelly places herself within the discourse of socially constructed gender roles—the expectancy for women to raise children and to ensure their children's welfare. Without directly saying it, Kelly rejects the notion that following a prescriptive set of rules ensures "good mothering"; the idea of "healthy children" is turned on its head through the visible stain.

As such, perhaps the rebuking of the socially constructed role of mother is why Kelly's stool categorizations are somewhat arbitrary. Visually comparing the aforementioned stain, with other stains marked as nonhomogenous and loose, there is an overall lack of distinct differences among them and an overall ambiguity. A large distribution area and an amorphous pattern characterize each stain. The decision to distinguish between these three forms of fecal patterns reflects the maternal stigma tied to a child with diarrhea—to label all loose patterns as diarrheal would publicly suggest a maternal failure, even though it has already been established in this article that these movements would not solely be the result of her actions.

Presence, Absence, and the Maternal Dilemma

In sum, Kelly's notations regarding the liners with constipated, normal, loose, nonhomogenous, and diarrheal feces do not simply imply a bodily presence. Rather, they imply the absence of the child and the lack of physical contact between the child and the mother. In other words, the liners with the annotations represent both the erotics of motherhood (in which one may think of both Adrienne Rich's development of the concept as well as Julia Kristeva's notion of *jouissance*) and its lack. They represent the erotic through the mother's need to physically touch her son while taking his gift of excrement away; thus, they also symbolize the presence of the mother and her own anal regression. As a whole, *Documentation I* represents the stimulated act of changing her son's diaper, symbolizes the pleasure of the mother, and demonstrates her relationship to motherhood, as it is socially constructed.

On the other hand, because it is not the child who is depicted in these stains, absence is created. These marks denote the relationship between mother and child; they imply a relationship created through feeding and changing, but by no means do they actually represent the physical. However, the philosopher and

art historian Georges Didi-Huberman argues the following: "The absence of figuration … serves as proof of existence. Contact having occurred, figuration would appear false" (68). He suggests that the stain or index has power and the ability to provide multiple significations, something that figuration itself cannot provide as readily. The fecal stain signifies a particular moment in time when the physical body was in contact with the cloth, but it also marks the absence of the body (the child's and the maternal body) and the passing of time, as the body is no longer present.

Documentation I reveals an interesting dichotomy. The stains that result from some of the greatest problems in infantile digestive health—constipation and diarrhea—produce the most unobtrusive stains. In the works marked diarrheal, the stain is not distinct; they have small tonal variations and few small areas of greater fecal staining. Overall, it is an absent sign, a shadow of the messy problem at hand. These signs, without reading and decoding the textual markers on the work, mean little. As Didi-Huberman writes, the stain "seems to exist only in terms of its tonal variations, only as an effect of its support. Yet the tonal variations of the fabric have no limits, sequence, or articulation" (66). The variations of the stains reinforce this notion: the days in which new food items were introduced had no overall distinctive change to the stains produced. It is impossible to determine, solely from the fecal stains, whether the introduction of a new or specific amount of food caused a certain type of blotch on the liner. It is, in sum, a shifting index, whose nature allows for the mother to transpose her anxiety regarding the dissolution of the mother–child dyad into a symbol of her own regression to the anal stage.

Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* is a subjective work of art that claims to bestow the truth of the changing mother-child relationship, which, perhaps, it does. It explores the weaning process, the presence and absence of the child, and reveals the arbitrary relationship between the nature of excrement and diet. In the process, Kelly engages in a discourse on psychoanalysis and on childrearing literature to confront her own maternal anxieties of failure. In sum, *Documentation I* demonstrates the multifarious ways in which objects, even feces, can mediate and replace the mother-child dyad.

Endnotes

[1]This is noted in one of the objects in *Documentation IV: Transitional Objects, Diary, and Diagram* identified as T3 27.2.76 Age 2.6.
[2]The idea of gift giving is explored further in *Documentation V* of *Post-Partum Document*. It is in this section of the project that Kelly preserves and analyzes the insects, flowers, plants, and scribbles given to her by her son.

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