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# WITCH MILK:

## SAMANTHA SWEETING'S LACTATION NARRATIVES

**Figure 1.**  
Samantha Sweeting,  
still from *Organic Milk*, 2007.  
Stop motion photo  
animation shot on  
a mobile phone, 6  
seconds, and limited  
edition flipbook.



**I**n 2007, the London-based artist SAMANTHA SWEETING (b. 1982) produced *Organic Milk*, a six-second stop-motion animation during which SWEETING undoes a nursing bra to expose her erect nipple

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before orally expressing a glass of milk.<sup>1</sup> Filmed on a mobile phone and published online as a .gif (and printed as a limited edition flipbook), the animation relies on a common visual trick in which the viewer is knowingly complicit:

*in reality, SWEETING simply drinks the milk, but in the film she reverses the recording to produce a micronarrative of ersatz lactation. The milk that fills the glass appears to issue forth from her mouth. The result is a short film that not only substitutes oral production for oral consumption, but also substitutes the mouth for the breast. Gazing into the camera, the artist unfastens her bra in preparation for the milk's arrival, anticipating the substitutive gesture. In Organic Milk, the artist offers ironic comments on engorgement and the sexuality of a non- or pre-maternal body. This short video sketch heralds her extensive investigation into the organic as well as social practice of breast-feeding, one of SAMANTHA SWEETING's primary research interests.*

Sweeting's work has much to say about how experimental practices can still be used to articulate and contribute to a feminist project. Like many early twenty-first century students of creative practice and cultural history, Sweeting came into contact with French feminist theory during her contextual studies at art college. In particular, Sweeting uses Julia Kristeva's philosophy of the "maternal abject" in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) and Hélène Cixous' notion of "white ink" in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) to underpin her ongoing artistic statements and creative work.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Sweeting is interested in how such texts rethink the productive functions of the maternal body, but also how, in their intertextuality, they deconstruct and re-read historical texts.<sup>3</sup> For Sweeting, French feminist discourse of the 1970s and 1980s has become a medium to be experimented with and through. Sweeting has experimented directly with the very possibility of embodying what Cixous terms *écriture féminine* (literally "women's writing") through performance art. In writing on Cixous, Kelly Ives helpfully defines the ambiguous concept or genre of *écriture féminine* as "a subversive position and activity, which deconstructs patriarchal (phallogocentric) language."<sup>4</sup> In order to *perform* the writing of Cixous and Kristeva, however, Sweeting adapts existing cultural texts (e.g. Virgin and Child iconography, *Moby-Dick*, and the "Peau d'Âne" fairy tale), which she revises and inhabits. She also uses a series of animal surrogates in order to summon the philosophical abject and practice in white ink. Far from merely upholding the theses of Cixous and Kristeva, the artist burrows into their darker, more torturous implications. Current critical nostalgia for French feminism often overlooks the more challenging dimensions of such texts, such

as the rejection of the maternal body, the notion of maternal failure, and the difficulty of reconciling the creation of life with the inevitability of death. Kristeva makes two claims that Sweeting has absorbed into her performative framework: first, the notion that “the abject confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*”; and second, that “The abject confronts us [...] within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity. [...]”<sup>5</sup> Sweeting does not dodge the confrontational features of such theories. Her practice can be positioned on an ambiguous knife-edge between care and torture (*nourrice/suppliee*), joy and sorrow, transgressing the limits of each by conveying text into image by way of prosthetic or otherwise surrogate acts of embodiment.

Sweeting uses photography and performance installations as the primary media with which to explore the aesthetics of care and torture, and with which to embody the experimental facets of French feminist discourse. Her performances tend to be private, dialogical encounters with select audience members. Her photography similarly bears intimate content; she often uses the nostalgic dimension of lens-based media to tell stories about objects, selecting heirlooms to reveal intergenerational narratives, as for example in her genealogical photo-object-performance, *Like Mother, Like Daughter* (2011). More directly, Sweeting combines the immediacy of oral storytelling traditions and the live arts in order to throw necessary light onto the re-encroaching conservatism of the present in western societies, especially the absurd perpetuation of maternal guilt,



Figure 2.  
Samantha Sweeting, *Like Mother, Like Daughter*, 2011. Photographs and object.

the bizarre yet increasing consignment of mothering as a marginalized social category, the weird silences around the agony of infant mouths latching onto raw nipples, and the foodstuffs of breast-milk and formula as doubly abhorrent.<sup>6</sup>

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***[Sweeting's] nursing of feral and semi-domestic animals, and insistence on the tasting of breast milk . . . coaxes her audience to rethink the ethical issues and politics of breastfeeding in public.***

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Twenty-first-century parents seem to be confounded no matter how they choose to nourish their offspring, leading to a strange social paranoia that does not appear to have infiltrated the rest of the mammalian kingdom. The governmental dogma of breast-is-best is regularly contradicted—the exposure of lactating nipples and lactation itself are still viewed as socially abject by many. Wet-nursing was once a common phenomenon, but shifts in the social strata and concerns around the transference of bodily fluids have banished such activities. Moreover, the duration of human breastfeeding is often culturally specific—many nursing mothers choose to

wean their infants by a certain age for social rather than biological reasons. Longer durations of breastfeeding have been found to incite controversy—as, for example, in the case of the notorious *Time Magazine* front cover (2012) by photographer Martin Schoeller, with the headline ‘Are you Mom Enough?’ and featuring a young mother nursing her three-year old boy.<sup>7</sup> Sweeting’s lactation narratives toy playfully with such societal concerns, enabling her audiences to dwell on their body politics and cultural codes when it comes to the visibility and physicality of lactation. Her nursing of feral and semi-domestic animals, and insistence on the tasting of breast milk, dairy or otherwise, coaxes her audience to rethink the ethical issues and politics of breastfeeding in public. In the spirit of Cixous and Kristeva, Sweeting deploys her imagery as an act of questioning and reawakening. She reacquaints body politics with carefully manipulated bodily functions, and highlights how such issues speak of broader repressions and ignorance in western societies. Through her visual narratives, she offers a useful site for feminist re-readings of entrenched social beliefs. By means of fairy tale referents as the primary cultural ur-texts with which to disrupt, Sweeting also engages in what the English novelist and cultural critic Angela Carter referred to as the “demythologizing business.”<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3.**  
Samantha Sweeting, *Feral Cat Diptych* (Self-Portrait Series), 2007. SX-70 Polaroid.



**Figure 4.**  
William Lyman Underwood, *Ursula and Bruno in Wild Brother: Strangest of True Stories from the North Woods*, 1921.

### MADONNA AND KID

Between 2007 and 2011, Sweeting produced a controversial body of work, a series of lactation narratives in which she appeared to breastfeed kittens, lambs, and humans. Reading Marina Warner's study *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), Sweeting was prompted by a curious William Lyman Underwood photograph (1921) of a woman nursing a bear-cub and a human baby simultaneously.<sup>9</sup> This image evinces the Roman myth of Romulus and Remus, twin brothers who suckled from a wolf, while presenting a jarring substitution associated with surrogacy. In *Feral Cat Diptych* (2007), Sweeting portrays herself "nursing" a black kitten. Here the cat, rather than the artist, gazes at the camera. The cat becomes a surrogate for the knowing artistic subject, allegorizing but also naturalizing the act of interspecies bodily care the diptych presents. Sanglier ("wild boar" in French) was one of three kittens the artist adopted from a neighboring farm after their mother died giving birth to the litter. As Sweeting cared for the kitten, it began to nuzzle and root at her nipples of its own volition. Three years later, the cat died of a hereditary condition. Sweeting later described the loss of this pet as the most profound grief she had ever experienced. Cixous deals with parallel themes of maternal responsibilities, surrogates, and feline bodies in her 1996 short story, "Shared at Dawn," which documents her mournful experience of clearing up the carcass of a dead bird, and her desperate attempts to prevent her pet cat, Thea, from reaching

it.<sup>10</sup> The cat in this story is the beloved villain, not the object of care as in Sweeting's image, but both offer unidealized revisions of maternal relationships of care (*nourrice*) and torture (*supplice*) alike. Cixous seeks comfort from her phobia of the tangibility of death within her immediate domestic sphere, wondering whether she should either awaken her daughter to help her with the bird carcass or contact her own mother, a midwife, who would not think twice about the corporeality of this task. However, Cixous remains aware of her cowardly recourse to surrogate maternal displacement, experiencing a crisis of her own mother/daughter identity-position in the process. For Sweeting, as for Cixous, the moment is pregnant with meaning. Sweeting's cat became symbolically a surrogate child, and the weight of loss imbued in this photograph is akin to miscarriage or the iconographic tradition of the Pietà. For both Sweeting and Cixous, such experiences at first appear bound up with a tortured maternal instinct that combines both authority and failure. On closer inspection, however, the notion of "maternal instinct" is denaturalized altogether. Sweeting surprises her viewer by positioning a cat where one might expect to find a human infant. Cixous tackles the incomprehensibility of motherhood and touches upon its bloodier, abject aspects too often quietly sidelined due to their conflict with the political requirements of the benevolent mother figure. Both compositions can be read as allegories for the empirical realities of the maternal, especially as they renegotiate the trivialization of maternal realities as merely emotional or "natural" situations—or as vestiges of second-wave feminist "essentialism." Both writer and artist combine love and loss, the unlikely and the unknowable, in profound ways by way of experimental media, short story, and Polaroid.

After the photographic documentation of her encounter with the cat, Sweeting sought to demythologize the maternal in further compositions. In this next phase of work (Figs. 5 and 6), the artist began to perform the arguments in Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater" (1985), particularly as they relate to questioning around the Virgin Mary's holy, maternal status. Sweeting also extended her investigation into *nourrice/supplice* as dual functions of surrogacy and intimacy. Stepping outside of art-world circulation, Sweeting went into a period of hibernation or creative incubation, cohabiting with a variety of animals in a menagerie. During a self-initiated residency in the Pyrénées in Autumn 2007, she suckled directly from ewes, and later described their "frothy" milk to be "like a warm milkshake."<sup>11</sup> Here the experimental aspects of her work were tied directly to the

experiential, as suggested in the French *l'expérience*. Two artworks followed this research: a video documentation entitled *His Fleece was White as Snow* (2008) and an archival photograph entitled *In Came the Lamb* (2009).

As with Sanglier the cat, Sweeting took responsibility for rearing a lamb called Oscar after his mother had rejected him as a runt. Again, the artist found that this unsullied creature was willing to be cradled close to her chest. Sweeting chose lyrics from the American nursery rhyme, “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” about a little girl who breaks the rules, for the title of the piece, *His Fleece was White as Snow*.<sup>12</sup> As part of her work’s conceptual architecture, Sweeting regularly exposes such titles as ruses by sexualizing and complicating the imagery: the lamb follows Mary because she suckles him. Yet little milk is produced, so desire is being enacted without the satisfaction of need. The biology of supply and demand is discontinued, and the erotic is brought to the fore. Sweeting also debases another famous Mary: no longer posed as Madonna and child, Sweeting’s Mary is dressed in a scoop-neck black dress and crouches on all fours—more animal-like and sexually-assured than the vertical iconography of the Virgin Mary.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the noble baby Jesus has been transfigured into a common farm animal, rooting instinctually for the teat and wagging its tail with glee. The oral pleasure of the lamb is abundantly apparent in



**Figure 5.**  
*Still from Samantha Sweeting, His Fleece was White as Snow, 2008. Video.*



**Figure 6.**  
*Samantha Sweeting, In Came the Lamb, 2009. Archival photograph.*



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***The torture of bestiality is  
obscured here, overwritten by an  
aesthetics of care.***

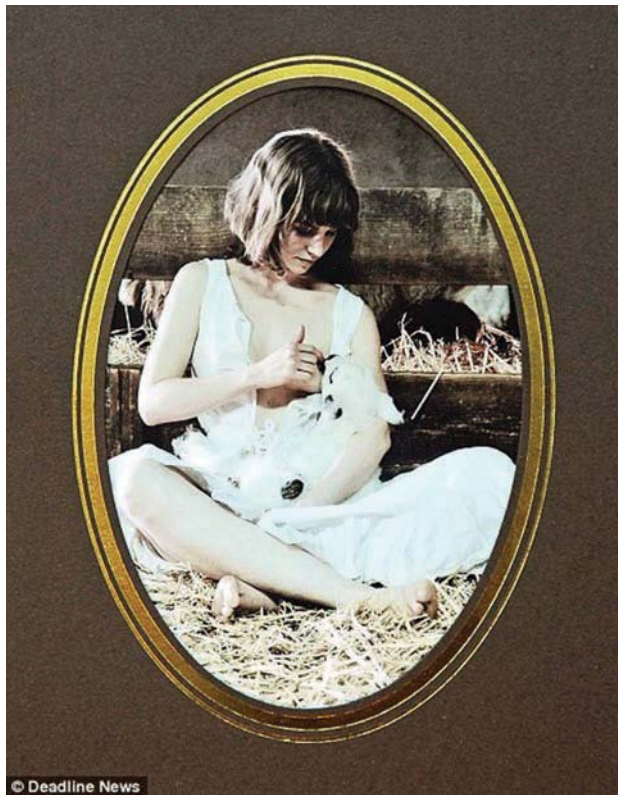
this video, and the affinity of this action with fellatio further eroticizes and contributes to the ambiguity of this lactation narrative. The torture of bestiality is obscured here, overwritten by an aesthetics of care.

”  
Sweeting’s profanation of pious imagery continues in *In Came the Lamb* (2009). Here Sweeting’s breastfeeding in a cozy stable replays the biblical, iconographic lineage of Madonna and child family groupings, drawing closer association between baby Jesus and his shepherd visitors, and invoking a peculiar Victorian convention in which John the Baptist was represented as humble shepherd in animal form. In 1875, for instance, the academic painter William-Adolphe Bouguereau depicted John as a lamb alongside a barefoot Madonna and infant Jesus in a painting entitled *Innocence*. Sweeting discloses the perpetuation of such imagery as shallow and suspect, echoing Kristeva’s complaint that, at first sight, “we live in a civilization in which the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is subsumed under maternity.”<sup>14</sup> Sweeting’s subversion of Christian values provoked a media furor when exhibited, with one reporter lambasting her work as “bizarre” and “tasteless.”<sup>15</sup>

Toward the end of 2011, Sweeting attracted further controversy for her contribution to Hendrick’s Gin’s *13th Day of Christmas* grocery shop window displays curated by Matthew Killick and David Piper for the Jeroboams wine merchants in London’s Belgravia district, and for the Peckham’s specialty food shop in Edinburgh. Exhibiting artists re-presented items from the kitschy English Christmas carol, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, as Victorian parlor games.<sup>16</sup> Sweeting’s contribution to this visualized carol was, fittingly, eight maids-a-milking. She used four variations of her *In Came the Lamb* suite of photographs placed in eight oval frames. Her contribution was greeted with outrage by the local tabloids. *The Daily Mail* claimed that viewers found Sweeting’s photographs too unusual for their tastes, while others were concerned about how middle-class children and the “Morningside ladies” of “the genteel streets of Bruntsfield” might react.<sup>17</sup> A quotation from a disapproving local mother is particularly pertinent in this context: “Mum Fiona Mason, 34, from the area said ‘The maids one is a bit weird [...] I think the whole eight-maids-a-milking

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**Figure 7.**  
*Matthew Killick, Hendrick's Gin's 13th Day of Christmas grocery shop window displays curated by painter Matthew Killick for Jeroboams, Belgravia in London, and Peckham's in Edinburgh.*



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**Figure 8.**  
*Samantha Sweeting, In Came the Lamb (variations), 2009. Framed photograph.*

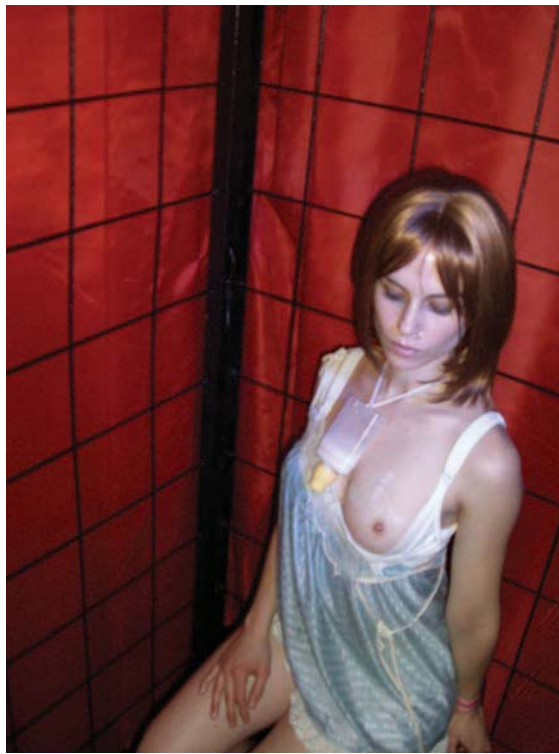
thing is about a maid milking a cow, not breastfeeding a sheep. It's a bit tasteless when there are small children going past."<sup>18</sup> Such controversy appears ironic when one considers the blasé attitude of certain tabloid journalists to their own topless brood of page-three models. Again, Sweeting's farmyard debasement of Christian iconography may have exacerbated the outrage. Long have the conventions of the nude and the supposed innocence of the fairy tale been used as polite veneers to mask sexual desire. Moreover, Sweeting's stable scenes may have shocked passers-by for her directness and reminder of the true origins of Christmas. The lyrics of the *Twelve Days* carol have little to do, after all, with the biblical nativity.

Sweeting's display of her repeated iterations of the revised Madonna and "child" iconography inside sepia-matted, gilt-edged oval frames may have further unsettled conservative audiences insofar as the nostalgic, reactionary frames—of the kind typically used for school-portraits and displayed on bourgeois family mantelpieces—travesty the visual language of home-sweet-home pretense. The unusual closeness that Sweeting depicts between milking maiden and animal, and her literalization of the act of milking as a human, maternal one, does indeed sexualize the verse of the Christmas carol she adapts. Thankfully, Peckham's staff refused to apologize for the window display, remaining defiant and proud of the experimental nature of their shop-window installation. However, as with the nostalgia of her framing device, which spectacularizes the maternal scenes of intimacy, Sweeting's provocation becomes a strategy of the artwork. As Hal Foster has argued in a discussion of other transgressive exhibits, the very provocation of outrage from an authoritarian figure (namely, a politician or magazine editor) is an essential component of a transgression (the breach that proves the existence of the rule), and is, therefore, deliberate and necessary.<sup>19</sup> Ironically, *The Daily Mail* journalist rose to the bait and fuelled the success of Sweeting's gesture.

Sweeting has nursed adult human audience members as well. She restaged her ritualistic performance installation, *La Nourrice (Come Drink From Me My Darling)*, on numerous occasions between 2007 and 2012.<sup>20</sup> Playing the archetypal character of "The Nurse" enabled the artist to direct the encounters without prescribing the outcome. As part of her research and development for *La Nourrice*, Sweeting began experimenting with her performance garb incognito in social fetish clubs, such as the Torture Garden in London, in order to

glean the experience in a “safe space” without the pressure of recorded documentation or an official art audience. Again, experiment and experience overlap in Sweeting’s work. Her use of a supplementary nursing system (SNS) served as a surrogate milk source, and its tubing enhanced the representative aspects of her performance costume, enabling her to get into character. In addition to this prosthesis, Sweeting donned a glossy wig and baby-doll dress, and posed Lolita-like in a booth—producing a vision of the fantasy nurse through a form of coy sexuality that was softened in later manifestations. As with her oval frames for *Eight Maids-a-Milking*, the costume, booth, and prosthetics allowed her to burlesque the figure of the nurse/mother/caregiver. Most importantly, performing at the Torture Garden allowed her to explore the care/torture nexus in explicit terms within an accepting environment. For Sweeting, the fetish club offered a creative laboratory for testing the limits of maternal sexuality and the aesthetics of *nourrice/suppliee*.

In 2009, Sweeting performed *La Nourrice* for the live arts festival *Visions of Excess* (2009), co-curated by the performance artists Ron Athey and Lee Adams. For this programmed manifestation, Sweeting sat on a milking stool mounted on top of a raw sheepskin in a dimly lit archway, creating a peaceful, nativity-like stable setting suitable for a Madonna and her newborn child. Documentary photographs from the event show Sweeting looking at once clinical in her garb and tender in her encounters, stroking individual audience members’ heads and cradling them as one would an infant. The adult participants in these encounters inevitably added an erotic edge to the performance. At first sight, Sweeting’s performance appeared less obviously engaged in



**Figure 9.** Samantha Sweeting, *Untitled photograph from Torture Garden, London, 2009*. Image courtesy of the artist.

the aesthetics of torture than some of the more sadistic performances of her fellow exhibitors, yet those who engaged physically in her work reported their reengagement with traumatic memories from their infancy.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 10.**  
*Samantha Sweeting, La Nourrice (come drink from me my darling), 2009. One-to-one performance at Visions of Excess, co-curated by Lee Adams and Ron Athey, Spill Festival, London. Camera by Richard Andersen.*

Alex Eisenberg has described his experience of suckling from “the mechanical breastfeeding system” of Sweeting’s faux teat, noting how this dialogic performance stirred within him “lingering” long lost memories of the all-round corporeal aesthetics (especially the taste) of his infancy.<sup>22</sup> As with many interactive performances, Eisenberg was uncertain about the true meaning of his desire for involvement, but the narrativization within his account provided a reflective space for rationalization. One wonders who is the true arbiter of torture/care in such encounters? From Eisenberg’s account, it seems the dialogism of the encounter allowed both participants reciprocal access to the pleasure and pain Sweeting’s performances incite, as well as the opportunity to experiment with the theoretical limits of performative intimacy and at what point it tilts into abjection or discomfort.

Sweeting appeared in costume in another version of *La Nourrice* (2011), sporting a white nursing bra and supplementary nursing system. She perched on a hospital bed (an ambivalent site of joy and misery) amidst the paraphernalia of



**Figure 11.**  
*Samantha Sweeting, La Nourrice (come drink from me my darling), 2011. One to one performance, Birth Rites Collection, Salford School of Nursing and Midwifery, Manchester.*

midwifery, including antenatal models and diagrams that lent her performance a clinical, “sterilized” backdrop. She then greeted participating students in turn, discussing the choices women make around their reproductive capacities, before inviting individuals to suckle from her. Sweeting reports that only four of the trainee midwives accepted her invitation, but those who did described the experience as positive, liberating, and comforting.<sup>23</sup> Consent was paramount in this version of Sweeting’s performance. As an experiment, the relatively low number of participants, even among professionals in this scenario, demonstrates the discomfort that prevails around breastfeeding and bodily substances.

Following *La Nourrice*, Sweeting honed in more directly on Cixous’s figuration of breast milk as “white ink,” repositioning the breast itself as the focal point or site of specificity in her work. In 2012, she contributed a performance-photograph to the *Moby Dick Big Read* project, curated by Angela Cockayne and Philip Hoare; the work consisted of a close-up photograph of her nipple, with the mound of her breast balancing a tiny origami paper boat, a delicate representation of the whaling vessel, the *Pequod*. To make this artwork, Sweeting lathered an indeterminate breast milk substitute over her chest while bathing; her photograph captures the chaotic let-down reflex associated with engorgement, the spilled milky substitute recreating the curdling effect that takes place when the watery fore-milk separates from the fat-rich hind-milk (up close, an oily combination of water and cream). The congealing, viscous liquid on her breast also resembles semen, thus sexualizing the already eroticized body part. Read another way, the lactic becomes abject. These very textures lend the scene an overpowering physicality that invokes an abject coating, demonstrating Kristeva’s corporeal recoil when the skin on the surface of milk comes into contact with her lips.<sup>24</sup> In total, there is a tangle of affects at play in this work that present a rich economy of multiple meanings. Sweeting plays knowingly on Melville’s literary joke of the *sperm* whale, transforming his joke into maternal iconography. The ambiguity of the substance depicted by Sweeting threatens the paper-based medium of the novel’s authorial “pages,” re-crafted into origami, and at risk of being capsized by the gigantic protrusion of her breast or of dissolving in the “white ink” of her breast-milk.

In translating the masculine “sperm” of Melville’s novel into maternal “white ink,” Sweeting refers to two select passages of Herman Melville’s novel *Moby-Dick* (1851): Chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale,” which contains the

haunting literary image of the “ship sailing through a midnight sea of milky whiteness,”<sup>25</sup> and Chapter 87, “The Grand Armada,” where the crew observe nursing whales and their newborn calves, many still attached through their umbilical cords. However, the curators chose Sweeting’s performance-photograph to illustrate Chapter 15, “Chowder,” where the protagonist, Ishmael, and his friend, Queequeg, are served “smoking” chowder with “small, juicy clams [...] enriched with butter” much like the excess of steamy milk represented in the image.<sup>26</sup> Sweeting uses her economical text/image intersection to encompass and embody several passages simultaneously. The floating location of the paper boat suggests that Sweeting’s breast might itself be a stand-in for the gigantic mammal lurking in the deep—not a “Dick” to be hunted for sperm but an engorged breast in the process of expression. She utilizes the quotability of Melville’s novel, and applies her own bodily topography to become a literary site, an embodiment of *écriture féminine* or what Peter Brooks and, more recently, Anna Kérchy, have described as a “somaticization of the text.”<sup>27</sup>



**Figure 12.** Samantha Sweeting, *The Whiteness of the Whale*, 2012. Photograph. *The Moby Dick Big Read*, curated by Philip Hoare and Angela Cockayne.



Here Sweeting's breast was literally and metaphorically her vehicle of expression, both in terms of artistic expressiveness and representational lactation. She literalized the source text at the point of infancy: the source of life, i.e. a mammal's first food, and her performance-photograph reunited whale and human in their mutual mammalian status as producers of milk. Seth A Hagen interprets the whale in Kristevian terms as a recurrent "maternal body that both attracts and repulses."<sup>28</sup> Sweeting goes further by feminizing and embodying the titular Leviathan, as Cixous does with her laughing Medusa. In doing so, Sweeting offers a feminist re-navigation of this widely travelled literary domain using the bodily terms adopted from French feminist discourse. *The Whiteness of the Whale*

goes beyond intertextuality as Sweeting literalizes both Melville and Cixous/Kristeva at the visceral point of bodily enactment and the experiential nature of affect.

#### BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: THE ETHICS OF THE ENCOUNTER

Why does such imagery unsettle its viewer? The controversial side of Sweeting's practice is tied up with the interpersonal nature of the live arts and her interspecies mixing, for sure, but also with the set of experimental procedures her work demands. This raises a question of ethics. Firstly, she acknowledges that no animals were harmed in the making of these pieces. Sweeting is a vegetarian who, like many artists appropriating taxidermy specimens, tends to use road-kill or animals that have died of natural causes.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, in situations where she has required



**Figure 13.**  
*Samantha Sweeting, La Tristesse Durerà Toujours, 2009. Image courtesy of the artist and reproduced with kind permission.*

a live animal to participate, the artist prioritized the aesthetics of care over that of torture, the latter absorbed by her own bodily and emotional investment. In cases where she cradled a creature in her arms, such as *In Came the Lamb*, Sweeting claims she never held the animal against its will. Moreover, she had already rescued the animal from early death, and she would have otherwise used a bottle or syringe as with most animals rescued during infancy. Thirdly, Sweeting is aware of the health and safety concerns associated with the transmission of bodily fluids. Although she has developed the ability to induce lactation in her own body, as discussed below, she has often used an almond milk substitute in performances such as *La Nourrice*, whenever humans were invited to suckle directly from her.

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***In order to produce new knowledge, one surely has to leave oneself open to the rawness of such encounters, as well as to the dialogical engagement they might incite.***

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Some viewers may find Sweeting’s performances of interspecies care discomfitingly close to taboo forms of bestiality. As criminologist Peirs Beirne points out, however, one would hardly describe milking a cow as a form of non-consensual bestiality. He also describes an “affectionate” encounter between a young girl who suckled from her pet dog, highlighting the importance of “social context” and “physiological responses.”<sup>30</sup> The theatrical nature of performance art similarly queries the role of any such “social context” in organizing the affective charge of the spectacle. On the one hand, representational, curatorial spaces are “safe” testing grounds, but, on the other, they are capable of provoking unpredictable dialogues that may be interpreted as dangerous or transgressive. In order to produce new knowledge, one surely has to leave oneself open to the rawness of such encounters, as well as to the dialogical engagement they might incite. Again, this is far more nuanced than merely experimenting on animals. Rather, Sweeting is interested in what it means for her as an artist-creator when the abandoned cat or rejected lamb chooses to nuzzle into her breast.

She finds parallels here with her human counterparts—she encountered the same desires for maternal care and the same reliving of painful memories during her interactions with human audience members. Again, the long lost practice of wet-nursing serves as a useful analogy for this gesture of surrogacy—which could be potentially harmful or caring depending on the given scenario. In calling such defunct practices back to attention through performance, Sweeting deliberately and knowingly unsettles her audiences and simultaneously enables a reassessment of presumed values. She cares as she tortures.

Sweeting’s hybrid status within her practice-to-date as a lactating, pre-maternal body is another disrupting force. It is worth noting that Sweeting’s lactation does not derive from a biologically maternal source—her body has yet to conceive an infant, and yet, over time, her daily practice of massage and expression has enabled her body to produce a lactic substance (a variation on the immaculate conception). Her induced lactation is a mode of endurance art in its physical investment in the experimental procedures of her performance art. Breast milk itself may not be an “experimental” substance by definition (it is, rather, a hormonal extension of giving birth) but it can be manipulated experimentally in a variety of ways. To those unfamiliar with such processes, such a phantasmatic substance may appear somewhat miraculous and out of the ordinary, perhaps even freakish and unnatural to some viewers. Sweeting’s process is rendered somewhat more socially acceptable within the literature and practice of adoptive mothers who may wish to attempt breastfeeding in order to bond with their infant. Florence Williams also reminds us that upon birth, infant nipples may occasionally secrete a small portion of what is known beguilingly as “witch’s milk” due to an excess of maternal hormones still in their systems.<sup>31</sup> As a pre-maternal body, one might query Sweeting’s understanding and experience of maternal trials and tribulations as a form of nostalgic idealization.

The artist more accurately occupies the position of child-woman so often focused upon in fairy tales and emphasized by Cixous. In *Eight Maids-a-Milking*, Sweeting portrays herself knowingly with an Alice Liddell-style gamine haircut and a white dress split to the waist, connoting a coy, Lolita-esque false innocence associated with sexual availability. Throughout her practice, Sweeting effectively reasserts traditional narratives of the fairy-tale blonde, who is not a passive creature but a heroine actively dirtied, bloodied, and bruised through her infinite quests. As is often the case in fairy tales, especially in postmodern

rewritings and analyses of such tales by authors such as Angela Carter, Kate Bernheimer, and Marina Warner, young female heroines demonstrate a transgressive wisdom, an aptitude for escaping danger, and a command of selfhood.<sup>32</sup> Sweeting also questions the pornographic fantasy of the fancy-dress nurse/whore, explored in her early experimental incarnations at the Torture Garden, by complicating such binaries with maternal actions and purpose. Sweeting's sheer attractiveness and slippery status as "maiden" further troubles the categories she seeks to disrupt. Sweeting's body has been quietly dismissed in art world contexts, in spite of the prevailing cult of youth and obsessive imaging of young women in the advertising and pornography industries, as if beauty were equated with insincerity and somehow lacking in intellectual clout. Feminist art historian Amelia Jones counters such views when writing on similar issues in the body art of Hannah Wilke, suggesting that Wilke's attractive, "narcissistic" self-representation and rhetoric of "hyper-femininity" actually subverts or "unhinges" the objectification argument through an obsessional "reiteration" of the self.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Wilke continued to pose nude and defiant for the camera in her *Intra-Venus* series (1992) after she was diagnosed with terminal cancer and supposedly lost her "attractiveness." For Jones, Wilke shifted from playing the beautiful "sexual object" to becoming the object of the medical gaze,<sup>34</sup> which continues to hold true for Sweeting's complex costume of maternity apparatuses in *La Nourrice*, or the presence of smelling, rotting animal carcasses in other examples of her work. Sweeting's status as a pre-maternal body provides her with the very "elasticity" with which to question the presence of sexuality within motherhood in all its guises.

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***Samantha Sweeting's endurance art mimics the torturous draining of the maternal body as the infant suckles its supply. She exacts a form of torture on her body and her audience alike in order to proceduralize maternity as experience.***

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## CONCLUSION: WHITE REWRITING

Samantha Sweeting's endurance art mimics the torturous draining of the maternal body as the infant suckles its supply. She exacts a form of torture on her body and her audience alike in order to proceduralize maternity as experience. As



**Figure 14.**

Samantha Sweeting, *Bestilalia (I Never Imagined Life Without You)*, 2008. Performance installation, 2 days. *The Graduates*, Battersea Arts Centre, London. Donkey head made by Nichola Kate Butland.

Cixous proclaims, however, “There is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink.”<sup>35</sup> Cixous’ notion of breast milk as a feminine medium of “white ink” that can be used to overwrite patriarchal narratives has become an integral aspect of Sweeting’s practice. Sweeting experiments, somewhat “immaculately,” with this white ink without pregnancy or insemination. Applying (feminist) theory in (experimental) practice, she reproduces French feminist thinking without reproduction but instead via surrogacy.

Sweeting’s somatic inquiries into lactation, and the associated dialectic of torture/care, culminate in two epic performance installations that engage in the double literary context of her work: Cixous/Kristeva’s rewriting strategies on the one hand, and the patriarchal fairy tale on the other. Both these lactation performances address the theme of loss: *Bestilalia (I Never Imagined Life Without*



**Figure 15.**

*Samantha Sweeting, The Sanctuary of Tears, 2012. Performance and sound/video installation, Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia.*

*You* (2008) and *The Sanctuary of Tears* (2012). In the former, Sweeting chose to whitewash a specific text in this case, namely Charles Perrault's fairy tale 'Peau d'Âne' ('Donkeyskin') (1697) which explores father/daughter incest and disguise. In reprising the pantomime donkey-head she had used in a version of *La Nourrice*, and in assuming the role of the beast, Sweeting performed a retort to critics of her beauty. She sat in a farm animal's trough, demythologizing Cleopatra's legendary bath of ass's milk. Sweeting surrounded herself with feathers, rotting road kill, homemade taxidermy, and bottled potions, as if performing a rite of passage or a witch's incantation. Sweeting drew with chalk on the floor, and she used milk to write ephemeral shadow texts on glass—an inventory of all the paraphernalia included in her installation. In *The Sanctuary of Tears*, Sweeting continued such experimental explorations of ephemeral media or white writing. On this occasion, the artist utilized shadow play from within

a giant puppet theatre as a shrine-like framing device. She unbuttoned her dress to show her upper body, nude and in profile. She then used a breast pump to extract a secretion of milk from her erect nipple. During this performance, she framed her eyes and mouth using dollhouse architecture and accompanying video monitors. Her conceptual intermixing of droplets of breast milk and tears condense vision and embodiment. She sought sanctuary through representation and endurance but in truth it all collapses into an abject statement on the physical outpouring of sorrow.

Ambivalent feelings of loss, torture, and care associated with the malady of nostalgia are threaded throughout Sweeting's art. She once used the last words of painter Vincent van Gogh, "the sadness will last forever," as a statement for her overall quest to tackle profound, often incomprehensible, human emotions. Such practice is both comforted and challenged by the French feminist theories of humanity's conundrums, specifically related to the maternal and the aesthetics of torture and care. For Sweeting did not only embark on her lactation narratives after her encounter with a poorly feline and an abandoned lamb, but in grieving for her young friend who drowned himself during a formative stage in her own artistic development.<sup>36</sup> The surrogate logic of metaphor and representation is put to task. Sweeting's work presents a wish not only to mother and care, but also to be mothered once again, as an allegory for dialogic art making. She represents a conflicted desire to return to the nested security of the womb, only to be wrested from it once more, and experience the joy and agony of childbirth as a metaphor for the history of women's struggles. Her practice is politically effective not only because she draws close association between women and animal familiars and uses representations of bodily fluids to dislodge entrenched beliefs around the maternal and the erotic, but also because her practice has a complex, referential quality that reconfigures those deep-rooted texts from childhood, disrupting the origin myths attached to patriarchal civilization. She revises and demythologizes the presumptions of cultural and societal ur-texts through strategies of appropriation, embodiment, and abjection. The writings of Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous thus "mother" Sweeting's art as critical heirlooms, as much as she refreshes them through the experimental procedures of her performance art.

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## Notes

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Grateful thanks to Sam Sweeting for her correspondence and generous permission to reproduce these images. This article is dedicated to my research partner, Soren (b. 2014).

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.samanthasweeting.com/photographyvideo/organicmilk.html>

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Sweeting completed a bachelor's degree in Photography at London College of Communication and master's degree in Visual Performance at Dartington College of Art. She used Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) in her dissertation, and an interest in the work of Hélène Cixous developed subsequently.

<sup>3</sup> See Julia Kristeva on *intertextualité* in "Word, Dialogue, Novel," *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 64.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly Ives, *Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva: The Jouissance of French Feminism*, 2nd ed. (Kent: Crescent Moon, 2007), 62. Ives also reminds us of Kristeva's "pessimis[m]" around the possibility of a "woman's art" or "female writing," 31.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Many of these concerns were raised by delegates at the recent *Motherhood and Creative Practice* conference at London South Bank University (1-2 June 2015), accessed September 6, 2015, <https://motherhoodandcreativepractice.wordpress.com/>. For further debate, see La Leche League (2016), accessed January 12, 2016, <https://www.laleche.org.uk/>.

<sup>7</sup> Feifei Sun, "Behind the Cover: Are you Mom Enough?" *Time Magazine* (2012), accessed August 15, <http://time.com/3450144/behind-the-cover-are-you-mom-enough/>.

<sup>8</sup> Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line," *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*, ed. Jenny Uglow (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 38.

<sup>9</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995), 304. Further cultural precedents include Tori Amos, who nursed a piglet on her album sleeve of *Boys for Pele* (1996) in rebellion against religious upbringings. The same year, Scottish alt-indie band Belle and Sebastian featured a topless model mock-nursing a plush tiger on the album cover of *Tigermilk* (1996). More recently, journalist Kate Garraway provoked uproar in the media by allowing herself to be imaged nursing a calf for a television documentary on breastfeeding (2008). The artist historian Carol Mavor has also drawn a convincing link between Sweeting's images and the literary character Alice, who cradles a baby that has been transformed into a piglet in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871). See Carol Mavor, "Between Eating and Loving: An *Alicious* Annotated Fairy Tale," *Alice in Wonderland Through the Visual Arts*, ed. Gavin Delahunty and Christoph Benjamin Schulz (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2011), 88. The Victoriana of the Carrollian source text is important here contextually. See also Joseph Beuys' didactic performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965).



<sup>10</sup> Hélène Cixous, "Shared at Dawn" (1996), in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, trans. Keith Cohen (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 235-42.

<sup>11</sup> Samantha Sweeting, "Goat Milking: From Animal to Object," *Encounters with Animals* (blog), June 11, 2013, <https://encounterswithanimals.wordpress.com/2013/06/11/goat-milking-from-animal-to-object/>. See also Michaela Meadow, "Interview with Samantha Sweeting," *Viriditas: An Anthology of Contemporary Women Artists* (2014), 69.

<sup>12</sup> "Mary Had a Little Lamb" is said to have its historical roots in a rural Massachusetts schoolhouse in the first half of the nineteenth century. Sweeting chose this nursery rhyme because these lyrics were the first words ever to be recorded by Thomas Edison on his phonograph, 1878.

<sup>13</sup> The connection between the orientation of the genitals and shame in Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) are not far away here. See *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *Poetics Today*, 6, nos. 1-2 (1985): 133.

<sup>15</sup> Kerry McQueeney, "Controversial Christmas shop display shows eight maids-a-milking with lambs at their bare breasts" in *The Daily Mail* (12 December 2011), accessed August 15, 2015, <http://dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2073240/Controversial-Christmas-shop-display-shows-maids-milking-lambs-bare-breasts.html?ito=feeds-newsxml>.

<sup>16</sup> For example, "nine ladies dancing" were refashioned as paper dolls; six geese-a-laying became thaumatropes; two turtle doves and the partridge-in-a-pear-tree were represented as taxidermy specimens. The other contributing artists were Magnus Irvin, Frida Alvinzi and Raisa Veikkola (Little Theatre of Dolls), Sophie Turner, Natty Bo, and Hannah Martin.

<sup>17</sup> McQueeney, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Cited in McQueeney, *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Hal Foster, *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 157-59.

<sup>20</sup> *La Nourrice* was performed on several occasions including Open Space, Canada (2008); Act Art Festival in London (2008); *Visions of Excess* live arts exhibition in London (2009); and Salford School of Nursing and Midwifery in Manchester (2011).

<sup>21</sup> *Visions of Excess* came from the title of a collection of writings by dissent surrealist Georges Bataille (1897-1962) published in 1985. For twelve hours, exhibitors investigated and performed Bataillean themes of death and eroticism.

<sup>22</sup> Alex Eisenberg, "Review of Visions of Excess: Becoming a Child or a Lamb?" *Spill: Overspill* (2009), accessed August 15, 2015, <http://spilloverspill.blogspot.co.uk/2009/05/becoming-child-or-lamb-by-alex.html?m=1>.

<sup>23</sup> Samantha Sweeting, *Samantha Sweeting* (2014), accessed September 6, 2015, [http://www.samanthasweeting.com/performanceinstallation/lanourrice\\_salford.html](http://www.samanthasweeting.com/performanceinstallation/lanourrice_salford.html).

<sup>24</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2-3.

<sup>25</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), 210.

<sup>26</sup> Sweeting's image accompanies this passage read by Peter Burgess.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Harvard University Press, 1993), xii; Anna Kérchy, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing From a Corporeographic Point of View* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 295.

<sup>28</sup> Seth A. Hagen, "Hunting and Writing the Whale: Masculine Responses to the Maternal in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*" (masters thesis, Georgia State University, 2013), 8.

<sup>29</sup> The pheasants and partridges used in *Bestialia* are perhaps an exception to this rule; the raw immediacy of this performance relied upon birds that had been pre-shot by hunters—a practice that this performance also critiques.

<sup>30</sup> Piers Beirne, "Rethinking Bestiality: Towards a Concept of Interspecies Sexual Assault," *Journal of Theoretical Criminology*, 1, no. 3 (1997): 327.

<sup>31</sup> Florence Williams, *Breasts: A Natural and Unnatural History* (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 54.

<sup>32</sup> See Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, 345.

<sup>33</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 171; 179.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>35</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 881.

<sup>36</sup> Correspondence with the artist (27 January 2016).