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Fairy Tales Gone Mad: Symposium on Nathalie Djurberg's *It's the Mother*

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This symposium engages with the work of claymation artist Nathalie Djurberg. Djurberg molds and animates plasticine figures with as much precision and skill as she masterfully puppeteers her viewer's affective responses through a blizzard of violence, cruelty, and self/other boundary intrusions. Briefly commenting on some of the questions she proposes we concern ourselves with in her piece *It's the Mother*, I introduce 4 short commentaries that examine it from the perspective of maternity and its discourses, womanhood and its institutional abuses, internal objects that constitute our worlds with and/or against our consent, and the implications for psychoanalytic practice when a treatment traffics in the relational currency of sadism and masochism.

Amid the scourging debt crisis, interest in art has recently peaked in Greece. Galleries, art collectors, and filmmakers are thriving, leading Donadio (2011) in a *New York Times* article to liken the financial drama to a muse. Dakis Joannou has emerged as one such notable art lover and collector. Cherry-picked from his vast pool of artwork were the remarkable pieces that the New Museum mounted in New York in the spring of 2010 in an exhibit called *Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection*. Tucked away on the stoop separating the staircases adjoining two floors were two works by Nathalie Djurberg, a then unknown-to-me artist whose peculiarly powerful pieces, I have since discovered, enjoy worldwide acclaim.¹

In her work, best described by the portmanteau term *claymation*,² Djurberg relies on her remarkable sculptural skills and on the malleability of plasticine to create small hand-modeled figures, which she then animates. The film shorts she subsequently shoots are stuffed with scenes of brutal human interaction, visual ordeals "pushed almost beyond endurance" (Cotter, 2007). Djurberg, an unbeliever in reassurance and a rather arduous fan of anxiety, uses these nightmarish, almost as unsettling as they are dazzling, renditions of human encounters to take us through emotional roller coaster rides that upset and upend, distress and disturb us.

¹Her work has been featured in solo exhibitions in multiple places around the world (see Sherwin, 2011). In the 2009 Venice Biennale, she was awarded a Silver Lion for Promising Young Artist (see Birbaum, 2009). Her most recent piece, *The Parade*, was shown at the Minneapolis Walker Art Center and will be shown at the New Museum, New York, from May 11 to July 8, 2012, then at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, from October 13, 2012 to January 27, 2013.

²As a technique, claymation was first introduced in 1978 by director Will Vinton (see <http://willvinton.net/history.htm>).

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It's the Mother starts gently, with a faux-naïve scene of a plasticine mother surrounded, fairy-tale style, by her children. But as the scene unfolds her children, first tenderly, then aggressively, eventually violently grab on to, pull at, twist around the folds of her body. As things escalate, they take turns entering her vagina, vanishing into it as we slowly watch the mother's shape lose its contours to the invaders' body parts. Her body gives way to that of the children's limbs, elbows, knees, eyes, and ears with unsettling effects. It's a grotesque image matched only by the contortions of the mother's face in anguish and despair.

The authors of this symposium, all analysts from diverse backgrounds and with different foci in their work, take on the challenge of responding to this piece. What is Djurberg's intent in all this? Sheehy (this issue) wonders, a powerful question that in Johnson's (this issue) more Kleinian language registers the intent to disturb, the intent to burden the viewer. Weaving through themes of revenge and domination as "the currencies of relationship" (p. 56), Johnson wonders about the intersections between art and autobiography. How might Djurberg's identifications and counteridentifications inflect her art? What reparative gesture pitted against what destructive unconscious phantasy might be at work in her acts of creativity? That intuitive understanding notably finds support in Sherwin's (2011) informing us in *The Guardian* that "Djurberg's interest in animated models goes back to her [own] mother, who ran a puppet theatre." For a psychoanalyst, this quickly loops back to many interesting questions: What is this familial interest in the puppeteering of an Other? How do themes of controlling an Other or being controlled by an Other possibly intersect? What renders these compelling for the artist? Notably, a serious engagement with these fascinating and yet quite personal questions threatens to enact the very picture that Johnson so eloquently describes: appropriation, intrusiveness, colonization. How to know without colonizing, how to approach without intruding are the par excellence analytic questions with which we struggle daily in the consulting room.

Schwartz Cooney (this issue) joins Johnson to further the discussion around sadomasochistic enactments and the child's sadistic colonizations of the mother, recalling us back onto the drama unfolding in the mother-child dyad rather than that between the artist and her audience. Interested in exploring the implications of Djurberg's scene for clinical work, Schwartz Cooney briefly builds on analytic literature that explores what happens when the limits of containment are pushed. This brings her to a crucial question: When treating patients whose destructiveness painfully pulls on the analyst's psychic skin, when the patient's need violently penetrates the analyst's psyche, "how much can and should the analyst hold" (p. 60)? Are there particular types of patients or, formulated through a relational lens, are there particular types of patient-analyst dyads that can become particularly porous to these kinds of dynamics which bypass containment and steer right into the abyss of sadomasochistic enactments?

Entering the conversation from a radically different vantage point, Rosenfield (this issue) registers feeling "drained of engagement" (p. 62) as she's watching the clip. The representation of mother and mothering as a marker of psychic pain and of trauma, as indexical of the mother's abuse, of the abuse of maternity in our social discourse, already widely (and wildly) permeate our thinking, she reminds us. In the hands of Djurberg's recycling of this trope, Rosenfield explains, meaning shuts down and possibilities fall flat—*mother* remains that which she is culturally inscribed to be; *mother* always collapses back into the meaning that precedes mother-as-subject. The feeling that lingers is that of alienation and frozenness, a feeling of despondency and resignation to which Rosenfield thoughtfully calls our attention.

Traveling along similar terrain Sheehy, “annoyed and embarrassed by this depiction of maternity” (p. 65), catches herself in an interesting moment: “Have I been deluded? Has this in fact been my experience—that I have been used and abused and abjected and left deformed by maternity?” (pp. 65–66) she asks herself as a mother. Ducking this forceful interpellation with a vociferous no, she struggles to resignify Djurberg’s intent moving to wonder whether the artist may be suggesting that the plundering is done not by the children but by the discourse on maternity itself. Could Djurberg be intending to code the invading children not as biological offspring but as gesturing to the discursive tropes that dominate and control the maternal body? How does a mother escape an ideological apparatus that so heavily weighs against her subjectivity?

These four response essays interpenetrate and cross-pollinate each other and though the four authors start out at uniquely different points to engage *It’s the Mother*, they are with each other in a dialogue of the best sort: the kind that opens up more questions than it offers answers.

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