

---

# Daughter in Exile: The Painting Space of Christiane Pflug

CHRISTINE CONLEY, UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

---

## Résumé

Christiane Pflug (1936–1972) d'origine allemande était une artiste canadienne reconnue pour ses tableaux naturalistes de scènes domestiques représentant ses fillettes, des poupées et des vues des fenêtres de sa demeure torontoise. Mélancoliques, ses tableaux sont empreints de nostalgie et de terreur, associées à une « inquiétante étrangeté ». Ils évoquent, de manière allégorique, son enfance disloquée et déracinée par la Seconde Guerre Mondiale. S'inspirant du livre de Juliana Schiesari, « The Gendering of Melancholia », j'analyserai la « poétique du deuil » de Pflug à l'intérieur des paramètres d'une analyse féministe de la mélancolie, considérée comme un discours culturel montrant les difficultés qu'éprouvent les femmes à rendre culturellement significatif leur sentiment de perte. En analysant la pratique artistique particulière de Pflug, nous positionnerons son travail comme un anti-récit qui s'op-

pose à la tradition du génie mélancolique qui a privilégié la création masculine au détriment de la subjectivité féminine. Cet article examine aussi la production de Pflug par rapport au « Post-Partum Document » de Mary Kelly, c'est-à-dire comme une représentation de la relation mère-enfant dont on retrouve des traces dans les permutations spatiales des tableaux de l'artiste torontoise, de l'intimité de ses intérieurs tunisiens à ses vues urbaines des séries de la « Cottingham School » et de « Flag ». La théorie de Mary Kelly sur le fétichisme féminin dans la même oeuvre a été utilisée comme un modèle pour tracer la trajectoire du désir et de la perte de la mère dans les peintures de Pflug. Je conclurai en montrant que l'énonciation de l'expérience de la perte de la fille/de la mère dans les tableaux, légitime l'expérience du deuil des femmes dans la culture patriarcale. Et c'est en cela que réside leur plaisir.

---

I claim that every woman in this century and in our cultural sphere who has ventured into male-dominated institutions – “literature” and “aesthetics” are such institutions – must have experienced the desire for self-destruction. In her novel *Malina*, Ingeborg Bachmann has the woman disappear inside the wall at the end, and the man Malina, who is a part of her, serenely states the case: “There is no woman here.”

The last sentence reads: “It was murder.”

It was also suicide.

Christa Wolf<sup>1</sup>

The configuration of “woman” within a patriarchal symbolic that comes to life so compellingly in Bachmann's 1971 book *Malina*<sup>2</sup> finds its psychoanalytic equivalent in the notorious proposition of Jacques Lacan: “The woman does not exist.”<sup>3</sup> By this account, women are radically *other*, excluded from language and barred access to pleasure. Yet, women artists have persisted to negotiate this contradiction at the very crux of representation, for it is in the field of art that gaps in the symbolic are revealed, yielding new possibilities for a subject in process. The precariousness of this project becomes acutely evident in the work of Christiane Pflug, a German immigrant to Canada who lived and painted in Toronto from 1959 until her suicide in 1972.

Even before her untimely death at age thirty-five, Pflug received considerable attention from galleries, collectors and critics with retrospectives at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (1966), Hart House (1969) and the Sarnia Art Gallery (1971). She was one of only four women to teach painting at the Ontario College of Art during the 1960s, and received Canada Council

support in 1967 and 1968. She was represented by the Isaacs Gallery, along with artists such as Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland, while at the time of her death a feature article written by Mary Allodi was forthcoming in *artscanada*.<sup>4</sup> Following her death, the Winnipeg Art Gallery launched two touring exhibitions curated by Ann Davis: a retrospective (1974) and an exhibition of Pflug's drawings (1979). Davis' biography *Some-where Waiting* was published in 1991.<sup>5</sup>

In comparison with her female contemporaries Christiane Pflug had done well.<sup>6</sup> Yet, she harboured a persistent sense of professional failure that Mary Allodi has attributed to her isolation from a supportive community, for Pflug had no one outside the family to point her success out to her: “If you are a woman at home painting that is all you have. You have no other contacts. She did not move in the general artists' circle.”<sup>7</sup> This domestic isolation is inscribed in the paintings themselves, which comprise interior scenes or views from the windows of Pflug's homes in Tunisia and Toronto.

*Railway Yard in the Rain* (1961, fig. 1) is one of the earliest of these Toronto scenes, depicting the view from the artist's apartment on Yonge Street near Summerhill, where she and her husband Michael lived with their two small daughters, Esther and Ursula. A somewhat reluctant immigrant, Pflug had arrived in Toronto via Tunis in 1959. While Michael went to Paris for his medical exams, Christiane and the children stayed with her mother Regine in suburban Downsview. The year and a half before Michael rejoined his family in 1960 marked a disappointing hiatus in Pflug's painting, due to the exhausting demands of childcare and the difficulty of adjusting to her new environment. She deeply missed the quality of life and land-

Figure 1. Christiane Pflug, *Railway Yard in the Rain*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 49.2 x 55.6 cm. Toronto, Hart House, University of Toronto (Photo: Hart House).



scape that had nurtured her painting in Europe and North Africa. By comparison the sparseness of Canada seemed at first “banal and often ugly.”<sup>8</sup> She feared she would never paint again. The railway yard series marked her resumption of painting as a venture in the “New World.”

*Railway Yard in the Rain* is characteristic, recording the particulars of Pflug’s location through a tightly controlled naturalism that connotes the documentation of observed reality. Yet, there is a melancholy in the stillness and solitude of the vacant yard that belies any objective detachment to suggest another reality beyond the here and now. Trains themselves evoke nostalgia. In his 1929 essay on Surrealism, Walter Benjamin remarked upon the mournfulness of railways, those icons of nineteenth-century modernity that were “beginning to age,” soon to be “outmoded” like the first iron constructions, the first factories, and the earliest photographs.<sup>9</sup> But amid the dark boxcars and empty, cavernous sheds of *Railway Yard in the Rain* melancholy is also tinged with foreboding. The fences and open space on the left direct us diagonally to the train, while two abandoned cars sit darkly discouraging our passage. What does the mist conceal? And, more ominously, what might it reveal?

It is Pflug’s melancholy vision that intrigues me here. I am interested in how subjective loss and anxiety function within a practice of self-representation that is not self-portraiture. And I

am interested in how such a practice is gendered. To begin, Pflug’s melancholy gaze is married to a search for existential meaning that is characteristic of the allegorical impulse, constituting the very impetus for her painting: a self-conscious search for knowledge of the human condition marked by a mournful subjection to natural history. She explains: “I would like to reach a certain clarity, which does not exist in life. But nature is complicated and changes all the time”<sup>10</sup> and “I paint a little section daily and hope each day will bring something new. If I reasoned it out, there would be no reason to paint.”<sup>11</sup> Pflug’s particular combination of documentary realism and nostalgia is also allegorical: the observed reality of the New World points to the recollection of the Old, as the meta-textual structure of allegory installs temporal and spatial displacement. This displacement is the gap opened up by the split of allegorical signification between the “real” of the signifier and the “other,” between materiality and meaning. It is this gap that installs both desire and the process

of unresolved mourning that Walter Benjamin claims in his *Trauerspiel* study is “at once the mother of the allegories and their content.”<sup>12</sup> For Benjamin, melancholy defines the allegorist’s moribund attitude to the world; but significantly, melancholy is also the allegorist’s only pleasure. Hence, to read Pflug’s work allegorically is to understand that, while the pathos and anxiety that suffuse her domestic tableaux arguably find their source in memories of exile as a German “war child,”<sup>13</sup> the displacement of this “suffering from reminiscences” onto the work of art is also a source of pleasure.<sup>14</sup>

Writing on Benjamin’s allegory, Sigrid Weigel argues that the basis for Benjamin’s reflections on the gaze of the allegorist is “the existing affinity between allegory and the conception of the unconscious in psychoanalysis.”<sup>15</sup> Freud, she claims, recognized this affinity when he took up allegorical methods in order to render the processes of the psychic apparatus representable. Following Weigel, I believe the split of allegorical signification in Pflug’s painting likewise points to the scene of unconscious processes, and in this it is more aligned with Surrealist strategies than with the struggle for objectivity of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* painters with whom the artist has been compared.<sup>16</sup> Given this, my reading of Pflug’s paintings uses psychoanalytic theory in order to understand their internal relations of desire, loss and anxiety, not simply as reflections of personal biographical cir-

Figure 2. Christiane Pflug, *Interior At Night*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 140.1 x 127.3 cm. Kleinburg, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, gift of ICI Canada Inc. (Photo: McMichael Canadian Art Collection).



Figure 3. Christiane Pflug, *Kitchen Door with Esther*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 160.3 x 195.6 cm. Christiane Pflug Estate, Toronto (Photo: Edward P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario).



cumstance or conscious memory, though the autobiographical is indeed a crucial element, but as an inscription of female subjectivity that makes visible the very difficulty for women of representing their loss within a patriarchal symbolic. I enlist the work of Mary Kelly, an artist well known for her feminist interventions into systems of representation and her engagement with psychoanalysis, an artist who, much like Freud, brings allegorical procedures to the task of visualizing the unconscious and of imaging female desire.<sup>17</sup>

The unconscious anxiety in Pflug's paintings is of a particular kind. Her subject matter is in the order of the everyday and familiar; she painted domestic spaces that included household objects, her children, small animals, and dolls (*heimlich*). Yet her personal vision renders such scenes strange and unfamiliar (*unheimlich*). In the mid-1960s Pflug produced a series of night scenes, adopting a gruelling schedule of painting at night and sleeping while her children attended school. In the mysterious tableau of dolls at the window in *Interior at Night* (1965, fig. 2) it is not certain whether the inanimate is alive or not. This ambiguity is echoed in *Kitchen Door with Esther* (1965, fig. 3) where Pflug's daughter, seated upon the threshold, assumes the same *Rückfigur*<sup>18</sup> position as the dolls, while the trees seem to circulate of their own volition to form a vortex towards the open sky. These paintings are, in a word, *uncanny*.

In his essay "The 'Uncanny'" of 1919, Freud attempts to illuminate a neglected category of aesthetic experience via psychoanalysis. He tells us "the uncanny is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."<sup>19</sup> It is experienced as involuntary and repetitious, a return to a situation where the subject feels lost and helpless. And it is firmly rooted in childhood experience, where the factors of silence, solitude and darkness produce that "infantile morbid anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become free."<sup>20</sup> Freud cites examples of the uncanny in a number of fictional works, particularly German children's stories such as E.T.A. Hoffmann's horrific tale of the Sandman that steals children's eyes. Significantly, he observes that in the work of fiction the animation of the dead or of dolls only achieves an uncanny effect when the author convinces us of *the reality of the setting*. He also remarks that the animation of dolls need not reflect an early childhood fear, but rather the child's desire for the doll to come to life, and cites female patients who recall the childhood certainty that such a transformation could indeed be brought about by looking "with as concentrated a gaze as possible."<sup>21</sup> The

uncanny then is associated not only with the arousal of dread, but in the case of Freud's female patients, at least, with the childhood belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and in the instrumental power of the concentrated gaze.

The potential of this animating gaze to undo the very structures of difference upon which the social order relies is noted by Hélène Cixous, who argues that the animation of the doll subverts the border between life and death: *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.<sup>22</sup> The relations of ambivalence and antithesis encoded in the animate/inanimate dichotomy suggest an unrepresentable absence: death as the repressed Other. Yet, according to Freud there is another absence, another repression, operative here. While the word "uncanny," *unheimlich*, means the novel or unfamiliar, Freud discusses at some length the slippage in German speech usage between this term and its opposite, *heimlich*, which means familiar and congenial, but also concealed, secret, kept out of sight. He concludes that this extension of *heimlich* into *unheimlich* suggests something once home-like and familiar has been estranged by the process of repression: "the prefix 'un' is the token of repression."<sup>23</sup> As the reader might anticipate, this repression is sexual in nature: by way of his observation that male patients declare the female genitals – "the former home of all human beings" – to be uncanny, Freud surmises that the issuing anxiety is the dread of castration. However, because Freud's account involves a generic male viewer, he fails to consider how the uncanny might pose new questions about the psychoanalytic structuring of the gaze. For, presumably, anxiety in relation to castration and the sight of the female body will figure differently for the female subject, that subject who has nothing to lose. The uncanny in Pflug's painting, then, poses questions about how the melancholic gaze might be structured through sexual difference.

My analysis of Pflug's vision engages two terms that feminist scholarship have rendered problematic, the first being melancholia itself. In *The Gendering of Melancholia* Juliana Schiesari makes an important distinction between melancholia as *clinical* depression and melancholia as a *cultural* ethos, that is, as a topos of expressibility that lends cultural legitimation to experiential loss.<sup>24</sup> Whereas women have long numbered among the clinically depressed, Schiesari argues that the cultural legitimation of melancholia has historically been the purview of a privileged male subjectivity. The asymmetry of gender within the canon of great melancholics arises, not merely from habits of inclusion or exclusion, but from the very conditions of lament, where the feminine is identified with the lost object of male desire, as an unrepresentable absence. Turning to feminist analyses of Freud and Lacan, Schiesari illuminates both the difficulty and the necessity for women of registering their loss as culturally significant.

By situating Pflug's painting within Schiesari's analysis of

melancholic discourse, I hope to frame her poetics of loss meaningfully as a *counter-narrative* to the tradition of melancholic genius, to redeem her work from its isolation as idiosyncratic and to reposition it within current debates in art history. A review of Pflug's posthumous exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1975 quotes a comment by the AGO's new curator of contemporary art, Roald Nasgaard, that the pictures "did not add anything essential to the history of art, it was their strength that made them so valuable."<sup>25</sup> This assessment, though laudatory, reinscribes Pflug's art as a poetic moment outside the narratives of art history, a position shared with many women whose work has been perceived as extraneous to the more pressing issues engaged by their male contemporaries.

The second key term I engage follows from the uncanny in Pflug's paintings, and this term is fetishism. In her project, *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), Mary Kelly proposes that, contrary to Freudian orthodoxy, women also fetishize. The castration anxiety that Freud reserved for males upon discovering the mother to be a man *manqué* is manifest for women in the fear of losing their children. The mother's collection of memorabilia then assuages this anxiety in the manner of fetishistic substitution. The economy of the fetish structures the representational strategies of the *Document*, which Kelly conceived as a documentation and visualization of the mother/child relation, where the repetition of elements in series replays moments of loss and separation. What I propose, despite radical differences in their practices, is a conceptual reading of Pflug's series of paintings through the theoretical lens of Kelly's *Document*. I will argue that Pflug's paintings are, likewise, fetishistic and that they work allegorically to represent the moments of separation and loss that structure the mother/child relation. Here, it is the spatial permutations of Pflug's work that come into play. Whereas the narrative aspects of Pflug's tableaux appear to reconstruct elements of *conscious* memory, it is their spatial organization that evidences the workings of *unconscious* desire. Kelly's *Document*, then, provides a schema for charting that desire across the corpus of Pflug's paintings from the late 1950s to 1971.

I proceed by introducing the biographical circumstances that informed Pflug's highly self-conscious production as a painter and allow us to make sense of the narrative elements in her work. I then turn to Schiesari's study to consider what is at stake for women as potential melancholics in the realm of cultural production, before moving on to examine Kelly's articulation of the mother's loss in *Post-Partum Document*. I argue that Pflug's vision is shaped by a double trajectory of desire, for if the past that registers allegorically as a site of irrecoverable loss relates to the daughter's loss of the mother, the meta-text for that loss in the documented present is the mother's loss in patriarchal culture.

## Biographical Notes

Christiane Pflug was born in Berlin in 1936. Her mother, Regine Schütt, remained unmarried, encouraged by the image of the "New Woman"<sup>26</sup> that redefined women's roles during the Weimar years, and established a business as a fashion designer to support herself and her daughter. Christiane's early years were spent close to her mother's design work, establishing a precocious artistic ability by the time she reached kindergarten.<sup>27</sup> This intimacy was disrupted by Regine's conscription at the onset of World War II and Christiane's frequent train journeys to stay with relatives and friends. These sojourns were not always happy. A sensitive and introverted child, Christiane's recollections recount various mishaps or accidents in an uncertain world of stern and disapproving adults. In her memoir, "Childhood," written in 1955, Pflug recounts a visit to Bavaria where her precious doll fell victim to the malicious play of the hostess's daughter. Pflug recalls intermittently taking the doll out of her box, hoping that the damage would somehow be reversed: "... I lifted her up very carefully but everything was as before, the bald head in which the eyelids opened and shut, and the empty eye holes ... I put her back carefully ... waited that perhaps everything would grow on. From time to time I looked carefully but it did not happen."<sup>28</sup> Also in this memoir she relates the story of the Nightkreppe who would steal children found out of doors at dusk and carry them off to the dark forest: "As soon as it became dark we went home quickly. In the dark the hedges looked like walls. The houses stood quiet and dark ... We thought of the Nightkreppe ..."<sup>29</sup> The forbidding and punitive images of German folklore clearly informed Pflug's childhood imagination. Elements of these narratives – the concentrated gaze, the dolls, and the mystery and silence of the night – make an uncanny return in her Toronto paintings.

Pflug's memoir, "Childhood," ends before her fifth birthday in 1941, when intensified bombing precipitated her departure for the safety of Kitzbühel in the Austrian Tyrol and the residence of the widow Petzold, a devout Roman Catholic who was by all accounts self-righteous and authoritarian. Waiting anxiously for Regine's infrequent visits, Christiane retreated to an inner world of reading, drawing and painting. She recalls: "With books, paper and crayon one could always create one's own world, which also defied intrusion by any unwanted people."<sup>30</sup> Conversion to Roman Catholicism provided some solace, as the images of the Virgin Mary and the changing ritual colours "gave life a beauty and depth which it would otherwise not have had."<sup>31</sup> Tensions arose from Frau Petzold's attempts to redeem her charge's unabashed state of illegitimacy, and though anxious to please, Christiane rebelled against the widow's attempts to replace Regine in her affections. When in 1949 the twelve-year-old Christiane finally reunited with her mother, she

ignored all correspondence from the woman she had called Tante Hedwig. In Christiane's memory and dreams, Kitzbühel would remain ambivalent, signifying both a safe, and often beautiful haven from the war, and a place of loneliness, guilt and trepidation.

While Regine eventually emigrated to Canada in 1953, Christiane determined to study fashion design in Paris, where she met her future husband, Michael Pflug, a medical student whose passion was painting. Somewhat disenchanted with her drawing instruction at the École Baziot, Christiane decided to experiment with painting in gouache, with Michael providing technical instruction and critique. Michael also introduced her to Vieira da Silva and Arpad Szenès, whose example had inspired his own image of painting as a total life-style and as a means of liberation from a trivial life. Christiane referred to these visits in mystical terms that recall Kitzbühel: "When one is visiting them one is so quiet, an old Gothic church window or like a small candle flame."<sup>32</sup>

Michael and Christiane's shared love of painting was doubtless the life-line of their relationship, as she later explained, "My painting is the projection of the life we lead together."<sup>33</sup> Yet, that life was turbulent from the outset. Much like Frau Petzold, the young Michael's strict moral code and disdain for the superficial ran counter to the more unconventional, liberal views of Regine's fashion milieu that had guided Christiane's adolescence. Married in Munich in 1956, new pressures ensued with the birth of their daughters, Esther and Ursula, in Tunis, where Michael completed his medical residency, and their move to Canada in 1959. While Christiane struggled with meagre financial resources and the conflicting demands of being a mother and an artist, Michael's own artistic ambitions were frustrated by the need to support his family while completing his French medical training in Tunis, and then re-qualifying in English in Toronto. Christiane's copious correspondence, always introspective, is revealing: insecure and indecisive, convinced that her disrupted childhood estranged her from those who had known the stability of family life, she continually laments her past as a site of irrecoverable loss. At the same time, her mournfulness is assuaged by an intense appreciation for the beauty of small things, a deep satisfaction in playing within the imaginary world of her children, and an aesthetic impulse vividly described in a letter to Michael in 1968. The passage below follows Christiane's description of Esther and Ursula's birthday party, where she sadly notes that a favourite game, "the birthday of the frogs," has probably been played for the last time:

And so everything passes, the sadness about what was lost, and what one never had, is sometimes so violent and unreasonable. I mean against all reason and what one could possibly expect. Always one wants to lift the day beyond

itself into something marvellously festive, dream-like and beautiful. Stella and Morris Louis succeeded. Compared to that, what one does oneself looks cramped and detailed, but I can't do anything else. The sun shines on the small houses, through the twigs of the trees one sees cars standing in front of each other. Covered with snow, the car roofs are set off from each other, here and there a red or blue one, which I am just painting. I love to paint again. I'm not so impatient any more. Sometimes it seems to me as if the mass of different elements produces an effect which puts it into relation to the complexity and confusion of life. Then again, one would like to take a broom and create space for clear pure forms and colours. And so it goes on, with the restlessness that eats one and hollows one out, a kind of constant battle. One doesn't want to imagine that one could fail.<sup>34</sup>

Some insight into the sadness and dread that underscores Pflug's aesthetic is offered by Melanie Klein's theory of the depressive position, as a defence against the loss of the mother and as the basis for sublimation and creativity. Klein's contribution to the understanding of mourning and depression in adults was based on her description of a stage of infantile development, commencing around the fourth month of life, analogous to the symptoms of clinical depression. This stage is marked by the ability of the infant to apprehend the mother as a whole object, rather than as a constellation of split objects "good" and "bad." Love and hate then come closer together so that the infant's relationship to the mother is one of ambivalence. Anxiety is associated with the phantasies that the mother may be destroyed as a result of the infant's sadism, provoking abandonment. Depressive anxiety (guilt at damaging the integrity of the mother as a whole object) is overcome through the reparation of the object, involving phantasies of repair: defending the mother, putting the dispersed pieces back together again, or restoring life. The satisfactory introjection of the (now whole) loved object strengthens the ego. For Klein, successful reparation constitutes a "victory of the life instincts over the death instincts."<sup>35</sup>

Klein's account of the depressive position is critically important here: first, because it brings the mother-child relationship to the foreground in theorizing both depression and creativity; second, because it recognizes the conflicted nature of this relationship, the anxiety of ambivalence towards the maternal object; and third, because it contends that the death drive is kept at bay through the act of repair. Klein's psychoanalytic account of reparation as a defence against loss and as the impetus to symbolizing practices has been elaborated by Hanna Segal into an aesthetic theory, inflected by her reading of Proust. For Segal, Proust's writing recaptured and revived his lost, destroyed and loved objects, as both an *incipit* to mourning and its

resolution. She writes, "... symbol formation is the outcome of a loss, it is a creative act involving the pain and the whole work of mourning."<sup>36</sup>

Segal's theory of art as reparation may account for the correspondence between Pflug's childhood dislocation and the characteristic melancholy of her paintings. However, the model of the Proustian *recherche*, as much as it may suggest an intriguing analogy with Pflug's interiors, does not take the cultural asymmetry of gender into account. Nor does it distinguish between melancholia as a *clinical* discourse and melancholia as a *cultural* discourse. This distinction is necessary if we are to understand Pflug's work, not simply as personal expression, but as an articulation that registers women's loss as culturally significant. And it is this distinction that grounds Juliana Schiesari's pivotal study on gender and the symbolics of loss.

#### The Politics of Melancholia

Juliana Schiesari argues that, while women suffer among the *clinically* depressed, as a *cultural* discourse that capitalizes upon the sensibility of loss, melancholia has been the provenance of a privileged male subject. She traces the systematic exclusion of women from the canon of melancholic "genius," from its elaboration by humanists in Renaissance Italy to its re-emergence in twentieth-century thought:

... as early as Ficino and as late as Freud melancholia appears as a specific representational form for male creativity, one whose practice converted the feeling of disempowerment into a privileged artifact ... the very nature of the melancholic was to be that of a self split against itself, fleeing the social into a perpetual dialogue with its own Imaginary, to use Lacan's term.<sup>37</sup>

In Schiesari's study, the exemplary melancholic hero is Shakespeare's tragic character, Hamlet, whose relationship to his mother and to Ophelia is symptomatic of the place of the feminine within the melancholic ethos.<sup>38</sup>

Schiesari contends that the discourse of melancholia has provided a "topos of expressibility" for men, allowing them to express anguish in a manner that "renders them exemplary of the 'human condition'."<sup>39</sup> Women, on the other hand, are reduced to "an inexpressive babble whose only sense (at least for the doctors of melancholia) is their need for a good man."<sup>40</sup> Within the schema of melancholia the "feminine" is incorporated as a site of representational loss, while actual women are disparaged, absent or silent.<sup>41</sup> This loss, fashioned through Neoplatonism, is idealized and nostalgic, linked "to a metaphysical quest for a transcendent union with the lost object of desire."<sup>42</sup> Yet, while melancholic discourse privileges phan-



tasmatic loss, Schiesari's study reveals how it can have real effects as a discourse of mastery, controlling whose experiential and subjective loss is attended to and accredited. She cites Frantz Fanon's discussion of how French psychiatrists categorized Algerians as "violent and aggressively homicidal, unable to sustain Cartesian logic and thereby 'prey to melancholia'." Anxious to distinguish the Algerian affliction from the European, they argued that "since by definition melancholia is an illness of the moral conscience it is clear that the Algerian can only develop pseudo-melancholia, since the precariousness of his conscience and the feebleness of his moral sense is well known."<sup>43</sup> Schiesari points out that women have similarly been deemed incapable of exercising moral judgement, a presumption which survives in Freud's formulation of the superego, his assertion in his essay "Femininity" that the formation of the superego in girls "cannot attain the strength and independence which give it its *cultural significance*" [emphasis added].<sup>44</sup>

Freud's 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," introduced this cultural discourse of melancholia into the twentieth-century "science" of psychoanalysis. Freud notes the similarity of the symptoms of melancholia to mourning. Like mourning, melancholia results from the loss of a loved object through death or simply by having "been lost as an object of love."<sup>45</sup> But unlike mourning, there is a fall of self-esteem, an impoverishment of the ego. Crucially, the loss in melancholia occurs at the level of the unconscious; hence, the subject may know "whom he has lost but not *what* he has lost in them."<sup>46</sup> This shattering of the object-relationship results in a withdrawal of the libido into the ego and an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. The ego, then, is subjected to the critical judgement of the superego as if it were the forsaken object. Freud conceives this incorporation of the object as a regression to primary narcissism. As with Klein's later formulation of the depressive position, the relation to the object for Freud is complicated by ambivalence, "countless single conflicts in which *love* and *hate* wrestle together are fought for the object ..."<sup>47</sup> He writes: "The complex of melancholia behaves like an *open wound*, drawing to itself cathectic energy ... and draining the ego until it is utterly depleted."<sup>48</sup>

In her reading of Freud, Schiesari explains how, despite this impoverishment of the ego, melancholia functions as an empowering discourse, for the belittling of the world and berating of the ego also function as a pretext for the ego to represent itself:

The melancholic ego, in order to authenticate its conflicted relation between *innen* and *umwelt*, inner and outer world, is dependent on loss as a means through which it can represent itself. In so doing, however, it derealizes or devalues any object of loss for the sake of loss itself ... refocuses attention

not on the lost *object* but on the loss ... whose thingness points back to the *subject* of the loss.<sup>49</sup>

While it may seem desirable for women to access melancholic discourse as a means of making women's losses count, Schiesari turns to the feminist analyses of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Kaja Silverman to reveal the difficulty for women in this schema, for the regression to primary narcissism that Freud describes and the berating of the object by the superego necessarily invoke the vexed terms of the mother-daughter relation. If my summary of their positions may seem to belabour the point, it is because the scenarios presented by Irigaray, Kristeva and Silverman are indeed resonant with the internal relations of Pflug's tableaux.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman* Luce Irigaray points to the chilling correspondence between the melancholic's symptoms of self-reproach and abasement and the libidinal economy of the little girl who discovers, through the devaluation of the mother, both her own and her mother's castration. The mother is the little girl's first object-love and the narcissistic representative of all her instincts. Yet, writes Irigaray, she is unable to mourn the loss of the mother and of her own self-esteem because the "*what*" that has been lost remains unconscious. Within Freud's narrative, what is deemed pathological grief in the male subject is endemic to the female's negotiation of the Oedipus complex. Irigaray is clear on the gendering of the object relations that prevail under "the moral sanction" of the superego: the object of wrath is the castrated mother, whereas the "super-ego would represent the 'paternal' figure, 'providence,' 'fate,' which as – unconscious? – agents and critical sanctions of that operation, make stern judgements about woman's sexual 'destiny'."<sup>50</sup>

This asymmetry of gender in relation to the superego is key to the structural absence of women from melancholic discourse, where the alignment of the critical capacity of the superego with the law of the father allows the male subject greater access to narcissistic mirroring.<sup>51</sup> Hence, Irigaray argues that, while the little girl or the woman will experience the symptoms of the melancholic syndrome, they cannot actually become melancholics in the cultural sense, because they lack sufficient narcissistic reserves and consequently access to a signifying economy that would represent their loss: "In more ways than one, it is really a question for her of a 'loss' that radically escapes any representation."<sup>52</sup> Irigaray describes this inability to symbolize the loss of the mother as a state of *déréalisation* which defines the daughter's exile within a patriarchal symbolic.

Julia Kristeva likewise interprets women's depression as a problem of signification, emphasizing the daughter's insufficient differentiation from the mother. Kristeva's topology maintains the duality of the primal mother as either idealized primary

narcissism (fusion, plenitude) or the primal experience of abjection. Representations of the mother, then, either fetishize her as inaccessible, as in representations of the Virgin Mary, or else perform an identification with the mother as repressed, unnameable, which is to assume a position verging on psychosis. In her treatise on melancholia, *Black Sun*, Kristeva contends that the alternative to this psychosis is matricide: "Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation ..."<sup>53</sup> The failure of the matricidal drive results for a woman in its inversion on the self, an implosion of bitterness, sadness, perhaps suicide. Yet, as a mechanism to differentiate from the mother and forestall psychosis, matricide involves the withdrawal of libidinal investment in the mnemonic traces within which the girl finds both the object and herself. It casts the mother as abject and devalued. Hence, Schiesari concludes that Kristeva's "cure" for melancholia is, like Freud's de-cathexis, precisely what *causes* female melancholia.

Kaja Silverman's contribution to these debates in *The Acoustic Mirror* counters this impasse. Her argument that women do harbour the necessary narcissistic reserves to withdraw to melancholia places the daughter's desire for the mother firmly within the symbolic. Rereading Freud, Silverman revives an earlier moment in his formulation of the Oedipus complex that suggests two versions of the complex must be negotiated by the subject, "one of which is culturally promoted and works to align the subject smoothly with heterosexuality and the dominant values of the symbolic order, and the other of which is culturally disavowed and organizes subjectivity in fundamentally 'perverse' and homosexual ways." Silverman insists upon the latter moment of the *negative* Oedipus complex, which underwent a "curious erasure" by Freud in favour of the "pre-Oedipal" as a "paradigm that accounts for the little girl's erotic investment in the mother."<sup>54</sup> The negative moment follows symbolic castration, where desire for the mother is initiated through the entry into language (Lacan's aphanisis of being). Silverman conceives this ushering in of the negative Oedipus complex as a time during which the child would "both desire the mother and identify with her, and in which considerable narcissistic reserves would be built up."<sup>55</sup> It is only with the advent of the *positive* Oedipus complex that Silverman posits a castration scenario consonant with the effects described by Freud, whereby the girl experiences cultural pressure to displace her desire onto her father, but also to continue to identify with the now devalued mother, a devaluation experienced as a loss of self.

By situating the daughter's "passion" for the mother within the Oedipus complex, Silverman makes it an effect of language and loss, within the compass of desire, and hence psychic "reality." Her "cure" for melancholia, then, involves a reconstruction of this negative moment, when the daughter both desires the mother and desires to be the mother, an exchange

across the mother/child dyad that is distinct from fusion with the pre-Oedipal mother as an imagined moment of repletion. However, while this unconscious desire for the mother co-exists with that for the father, it does not enjoy the same representational support and remains a libidinal investment in all that is devalued by the existing symbolic order.

Schiesari's study allows me to approach Pflug's work as an engagement with the very psychic tensions and pressures that are endemic to the task of female self-representation. If there is a confluence between experiential loss and the melancholy of Pflug's paintings, and I believe there is, its *interpretive* significance lies in the coincidence between Pflug's personal trauma – the loss and denigration of the mother – and the very terms of women's alienation within the symbolic, that is, the suturing of affective loss with the cultural status of the barred subject. For, without the feminist community and analysis that grounds Mary Kelly's practice, the "what" of Pflug's loss remained for her unknown.<sup>56</sup>

#### The Daughter's Desire

It is Pflug's paintings of dolls that signal most immediately a negotiation of the mother/daughter relation. Dolls are not objects in the way of other toys such as blocks and cars. Playing with a quasi-subject such as a doll involves relations of intersubjectivity rather than mastery over an object. Irigaray suggests that little girls use dolls to symbolize the absence of the mother, much as Freud's little grandson Ernst symbolized the departures of his mother with a reel and string – *fort-da*.<sup>57</sup> If one were to imagine the relations of identification and desire of the negative Oedipus complex that Silverman describes as a form of play, then surely it would be the exchange of roles that is characteristic of the little girl playing with her doll. Here, too, one could imagine another kind of exchange at the level of phantasy: a phantasy of the reciprocal gaze.

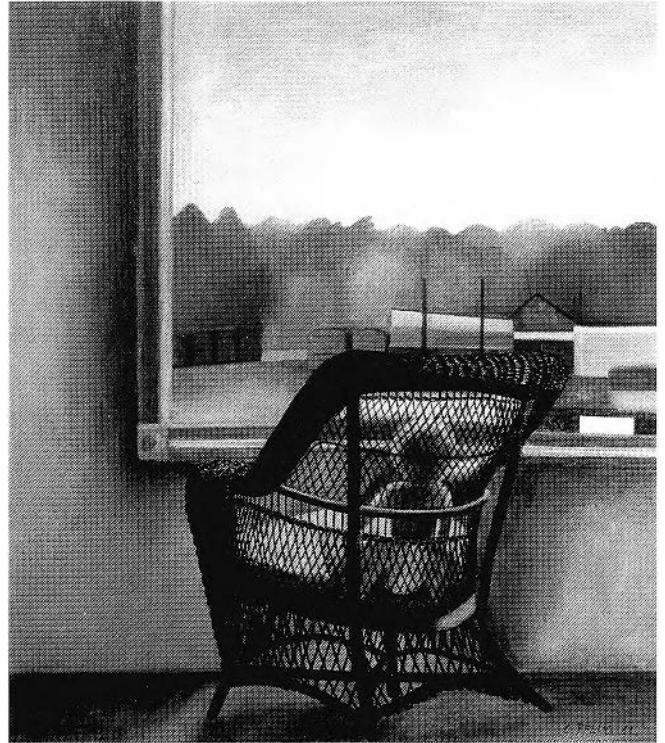
Pflug's series of paintings featuring highly contrived arrangements of dolls corresponds most directly to her memoir, "Childhood," where she recalls vivid encounters with dolls during a visit to Bavaria without her mother. In *On the Black Chair II* (1963, fig. 4) a Shirley Temple doll, accompanied by a stuffed cat, sits upon a black wicker chair. The doll was a popular one during the years of Christiane's childhood, and while bearing no physical resemblance to the artist, as a film star Shirley Temple was associated with the role of an orphan.<sup>58</sup> The scene is lit by a bright light, distributed evenly over the warm, yellow cushion, sharply illuminating each detail of the foreground setting circumscribed by the screen of the basket weave. The Shirley Temple doll stares towards the light source that casts deep shadows on the blue carpet; the cat appears wide-eyed as if caught in the flash of a camera. The intense light



Figure 4. Christiane Pflug, *On the Black Chair II*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 82.5 x 75.2 cm. Toronto, Collection of Mr Don Haig (Photo: Edward P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario).



Figure 5. Christiane Pflug, *Window on Yonge Street*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 57 x 49 cm. Private Collection (Photo: Edward P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario).



produces an uncanny effect, the impression of arrested movement in a moment of sudden exposure.

This tableau revisits one of Pflug's childhood encounters. Awakened one night by a thunder storm, Christiane was fascinated by the lightning's illumination of a number of dolls "sitting stiffly in their chairs" in the adjoining room. "For an instant," she writes, "I saw the dolls in the bright yellow light. Then it turned blue and disappeared again."<sup>59</sup> She waited in anticipation to see them again and again, but the lightning flashes were so brief, then faded away altogether. She went back to sleep.

The Shirley Temple doll and chair are featured in two earlier, somewhat smaller paintings, *Window on Yonge Street* (1961, fig. 5) and *On the Black Chair I* (1963, fig. 6), which were reproduced in a 1964 article flanking *On the Black Chair II* to form a triptych.<sup>60</sup> The rendering, colour and triptych format emulate the pictorial conventions of Northern Renaissance altarpieces which Pflug admired.<sup>61</sup> Much like images of the Madonna and Child, Pflug's presentation of the doll invokes the viewer to "behold." One is reminded of her fascination in Kitzbühel with the many altarpieces and paintings of the Virgin Mary, a corpus of images that Kristeva associates with the "semiotic." For Kristeva, the Madonna's milk and tears, signifying the suffering of humanity, symbolize a "return of the repressed" in monotheism, and establish in painting and music a non-verbal signifying modality closer to the primary processes.<sup>62</sup>

Figure 6. Christiane Pflug, *On the Black Chair I*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 55 x 46.2 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).



Kristeva can, then, write of a maternal space in the pictorial to which we have no direct access, a maternal function that is apprehended as ineffable *jouissance*, beyond discourse, beyond figuration. This space of desire lies between and separates the mother and infant.<sup>63</sup> One could speculate upon the space encompassed by the black chair as such a space, a visual imprint of the invocations to the Virgin that marked out the days in Kitzbühel.<sup>64</sup>

In *Window on Yonge Street* the chair is turned to face the window. The doll appears to gaze out upon the same view depicted in *Railway Yard in the Rain*, though the treatment of the window frame introduces ambiguity: perhaps it is not a vista but a painting, a substitution, much like the doll that surveys the scene with apparent longing. *On the Black Chair I* presents the doll lying down, her repose and closed eyes recalling the story of Christiane's broken doll in her childhood memoirs, an incident that followed closely upon her awakening by lightning and, likewise, concerns the failure of the concentrated gaze to transform reality.

In Freud's discussion of the uncanny this failure marks the limit of childhood omnipotence. In Lacan's account of painting it corresponds to the failure of representation, the "not all" in the dialectic of the eye and the gaze demonstrated through the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasios. Where Zeuxis paints grapes that deceive and lure the birds, Parrhasios paints a veil that deceives Zeuxis, who asks what has been painted behind it. This "triumph of the gaze over the eye" maintains desire in the field of vision.<sup>65</sup> Lacan tells us that the gaze is apprehended as a strange contingency "symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety."<sup>66</sup> It is this anxiety that fills the emptiness of the image, the absence of what I wish to see. For Lacan the subject in the visible is determined by the gaze that is outside. In a passage resonant with the arrested "photographic" moment in *On the Black Chair II*, Lacan writes: "It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which ... I am *photographed*."<sup>67</sup> It is through the gaze that the subject is put "in the picture." Peggy Phelan elaborates on this performative aspect of representation: what keeps the looker looking at the picture is "the failure of the perceiver to be seen," that is, "the (failed) desire for a reciprocal gaze."<sup>68</sup> It is in this (failed) desire for the reciprocal gaze, what is apprehended as the emptiness of the image, that I locate the pathos of Pflug's doll paintings.

In his re-reading of Freud, Lacan's interpretation of the *fort-da* game aligns it with the subject's entry into language. The "ditch" that separates Freud's grandson from his cot, where he repeatedly throws the cotton reel (*fort!*) and retrieves it (*da!*), corresponds to the gap between signifier and signified that splits

both the sign and the subject. The mother's departure is the cause of a *Spaltung*, a splitting of the ego into two responses to reality, one which takes it into account, and another which detaches itself from reality, disavows it and replaces it with a "product of desire" – a game, a representation.<sup>69</sup> This second response is associated with fetishism.

While the dolls are part of a complex iconography which begs elucidation – numerous vessels, birds, bird cages, and so on – I contend that, over and above their possible symbolic meanings, their operation in Pflug's work is fetishistic. They function to disavow loss through a process of substitution, of presence for absence, while keeping in abeyance the anxiety of the real. Freudian orthodoxy considers fetishism a specifically male perversion, where discovery of the mother's castration is both acknowledged and denied by means of a phallic substitute. You will recall the uncanniness of this sight, and my earlier indication that it is structured through sexual difference. Indeed, Freud contends that the little girl's need to negotiate the discovery is deferred through the promise of someday having a child. But as Mary Kelly points out, motherhood forces a confrontation with this lack, as the experience proves not to be the phallic one that the child imagined. It is in this way, Kelly claims, that motherhood "seals" feminine psychology.

### The Mother's Desire

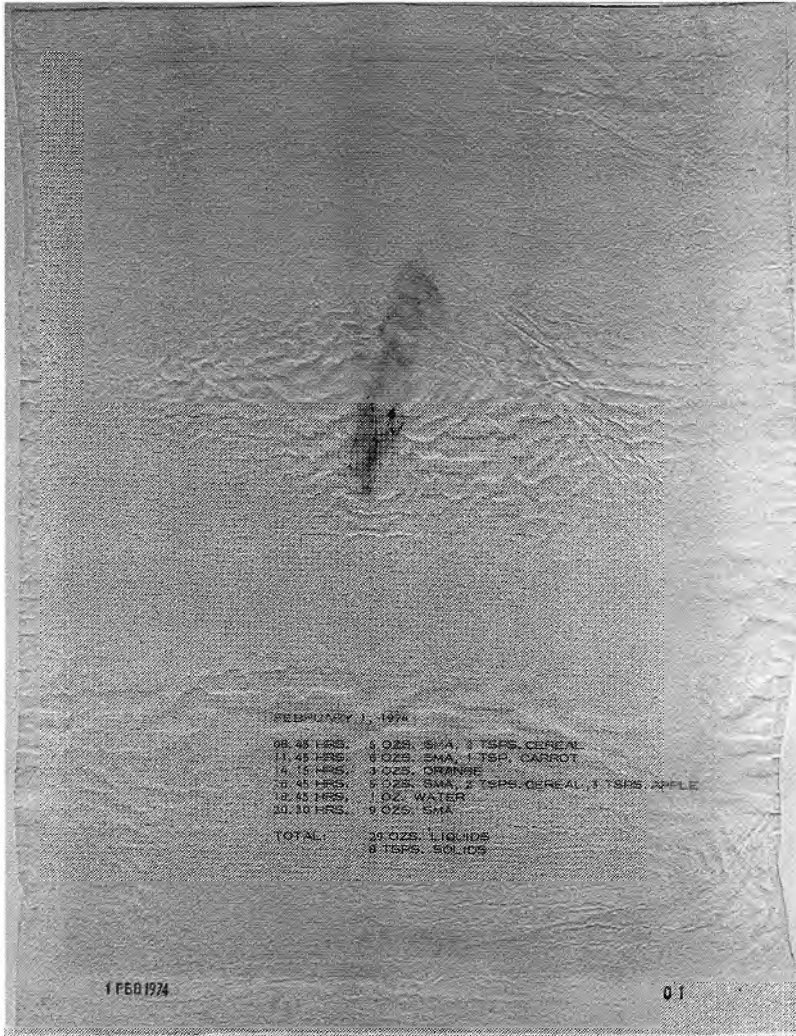
Mary Kelly suggests in *Post-Partum Document* that the mother's relation to her child as a substitute for the phallus leads her to fetishize the child, to delay the loss of symbolic plenitude, or "more exactly, the ability to represent lack." She writes,

When [Freud] describes castration fears for the woman, this imaginary scenario takes the form of losing her loved objects, especially her children; the child is going to grow up, leave her, reject her, perhaps die. In order to delay, disavow, the separation that she has already in a way acknowledged, the woman tends to fetishise the child ... So perhaps in place of the more familiar notion of pornography, it is possible to talk about the mother's memorabilia.<sup>70</sup>

It is Kelly's own collection of memorabilia – stained nappy liners, the baby's "blankie," his drawings, and so on – that is presented in her six series of documentations. By displacing "the potential fetishisation of the child onto the work of art" Kelly conveys her own sense of maternal anxiety while also suggesting "the fetishistic nature of representation itself."<sup>71</sup>

The mother's loss is inscribed across the documentations, commencing with the process of weaning and ending with the child's entry into school (and written language). Each series signifies a stage in the process of separation, the inevitable

Figure 7. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document, Documentation I: Analysed fecal stains and feeding charts, 1974*. Mixed media, detail I of 28, 27.9 x 35.6 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Courtesy of Mary Kelly).



relinquishing of the mother's pleasure in the corporeal reality of the child. The daughter's loss of proximity to the mother in her own infancy is replayed through the loss of proximity to her child, a repetition of recollection that cancels temporal progression. Kelly writes that this loss is "staged as a maternal version of the Fort/Da game."<sup>72</sup> It is most poignantly evoked by the juxtaposition of elements in *Documentation IV*, where the mother's investment in her memorabilia is represented by a clay imprint of her infant's tiny hand, his fingers curled, while below a fragment of the baby's "blankie" represents his own negotiation of separation and desire for the mother. In relation to the politics of melancholic discourse, Kelly's strategy allows the mother to represent her loss, *ergo*, represent herself as a subject of desire, a move that counters her status as the barred subject. But crucially, this representation is not at the expense of the lost object. Kelly's objects remain cathected; as "souvenirs" they

point back to and confer value upon their own origin: the child and the mother as artist.

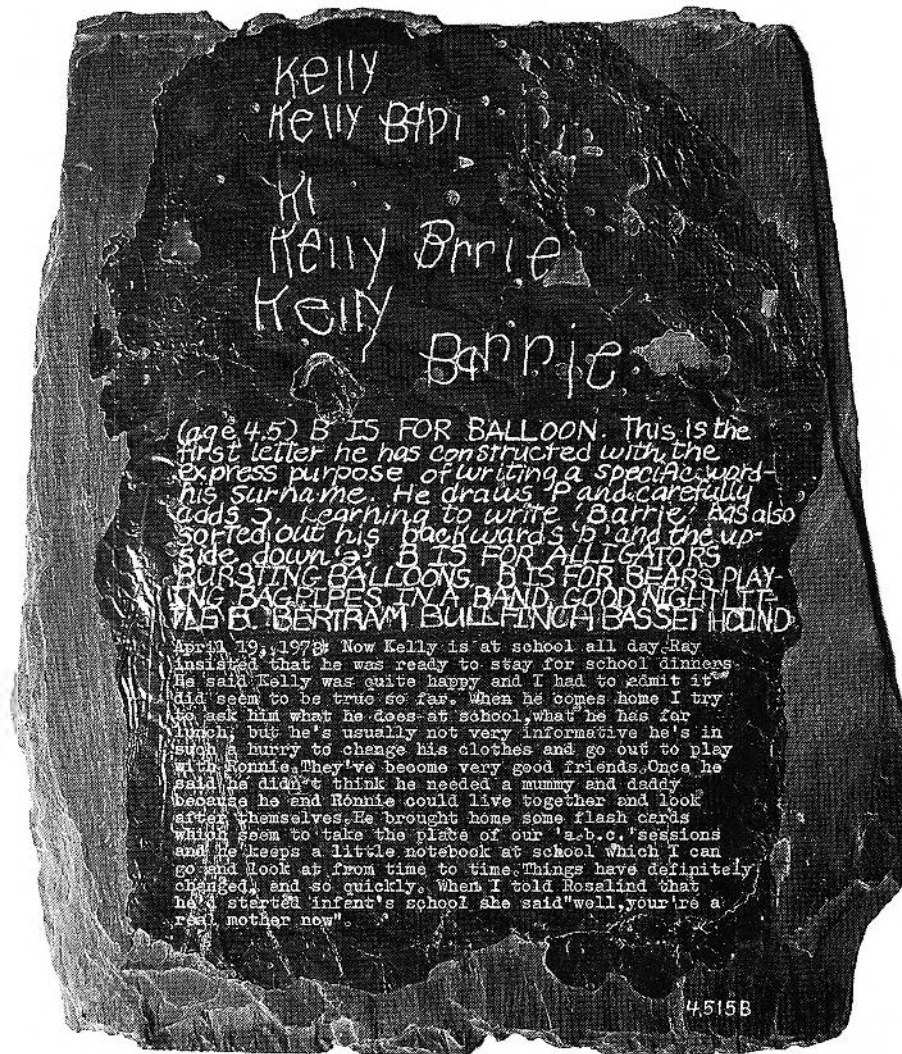
Thus far I have addressed the longing in Pflug's paintings as a function of the daughter's desire. But as Kelly demonstrates, this is only half the story. And with the births of Esther and Ursula, one year apart in Tunis, Pflug assumed the position of the mother/artist. I will now consider how Kelly's visualization of the mother/child relationship illuminates the libidinal investments in the spatial permutations of Pflug's paintings.

In the *Document* there is a transition across the series from the amorphous stains of the nappy liners in *Documentation I* (1974, fig. 7) to the written word of *Documentation VI* (1978, fig. 8) where the child inscribes and claims the paternal name as his own. There is a movement from traces that resist signification to the symbolic purchase of written language. This semiotic transition marks the trajectory of the mother's desire. I propose that such a trajectory exists in Pflug's paintings and that it corresponds to the deepening perspective that cuts across her practice.

Pflug's first still-lives in Tunis (1956–58) evince a fascination with the isolation of objects and their containment. Early examples involve bottles displayed within the shallow space of a cupboard. Her use of vessels such as cups, teapots and vases introduces notions of enclosure and containment, of inside and outside, while their placement seems to foreground issues of proximity and distance. So, while there is an evident delight in the shape and colour of these objects, there is also a strangeness in their presentation that issues from their

isolation, both from each other and from the viewer. In *Still-Life with Clock Face and Tiles* (1957), a handleless clock, teapot, vase, bottle and cup are lined up close to the wall, seemingly pushed to the horizon by the wide empty space of the chequered tile foreground. The corner dissolves in the light so that the wall envelops the scene rather than marking a solid boundary. This effect is repeated in the warmth and serenity of *Tunisian Interior* (1958, fig. 9) where the effusive light has an expansive effect, softening the rectilinear surfaces of the room. And it shapes the space of *Birdcage with Pears* (1958, fig. 10) where the cropping of the table surface pulls the viewer into the centre of the presentation, a bird inside a cage of indeterminate shape, two fulsome pears and a pewter cup. These enveloping or containing spaces shape a *mise-en-scène* in which objects present themselves as if in a dream. Strangeness here does not provoke anxiety but a passive attentiveness that is the condition of the dreaming sub-

Figure 8. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document, Documentation VI: Pre-writing alphabet, exergue and diary*, 1978. Resin and slate, detail 1 of 15, 20.3 x 25.4 cm. London, Arts Council of England (Photo: Courtesy of Mary Kelly).



ject, a function of what Lacan calls the “it shows” of the dream image, analogous to the “behold” of the religious icon. These spatial relations of separation within enclosure coincide with Pflug’s experience of pregnancy, parturition and early motherhood, until the birth of her second daughter, Ursula, brought her painting to a halt. In these spaces within and between, and particularly in the plenitude of *Tunisian Interior*, one recognizes the “fullness of the dyad” that Kelly describes, “the sweetness of that imaginary encapsulation which reduces the ‘outside world’ to absurdity.”<sup>73</sup>

It is through the window motif, first introduced in the Yonge Street location (1960–62) and more fully developed in her home on Woodlawn Avenue (1962–67), that the rhythm of the *fort-da* punctuates the picture: here/there, inside/outside. In *Interior at Night* (fig. 2) the dolls survey the vacant residential street where solid, enigmatic shadows are cast upon empty

lawns. Through the upper portion of the sash window the globe of the street-light is suspended in the reflection of the interior; the upper portion of an easel signals the gaze of the artist. The parted curtain directs us to “look.” Since the genesis of Alberti’s perspectival grids, the condition of the window has been synonymous with the disincarnated view of the sovereign subject, the very foundation of modernist opticality. Yet, the dual property of glass to both transmit and reflect light, so important to symbolist art, ruptures the assurance of this vantage point.<sup>74</sup> In as much as the window is a trope for the borderline between self and other, the ambivalence of Pflug’s rendition that puts us both inside and outside announces the difficulty of negotiating this interface as an either/or proposition.

Maternal loss is most poignant in the paintings of Pflug’s daughters that followed the doll paintings.<sup>75</sup> The ambivalence of the window motif is repeated in *Kitchen Door with Esther* (1965, fig. 3) and *Kitchen Door with Ursula* (1966, fig. 11) where the reflective panes of the French door bring the outside inside. These are not portraits. The placement of Esther on the threshold and Ursula on the balcony repeats the format of numerous earlier doll paintings: dolls standing or sitting in a

chair on the balcony, gazing into the distance or looking back into the kitchen. In *The Kitchen Door in Winter II* (1964), the black doll is pressed against the closed kitchen door, looking in through the grid of the panes as if she might reach for the doorknob. Coatless in the dead of winter, her figure evokes both pathos and the trepidation of the uncanny.<sup>76</sup> Pflug’s paintings with her daughters are more optimistic, though the small back of Esther speaks of a vulnerability potentially overwhelmed by the forces that circulate beyond. Ursula is allowed to venture further, glimpsed in reflection within a spring landscape though the view framed by the door is of winter. This temporal displacement arises from Pflug’s slow, painstaking method of working from nature, yet it also installs the gap that is the space of desire. Through the reflecting device of the window, Ursula is both distant and proximate: both/and.

In the “Cottingham School” series the window no longer



Figure 9. Christiane Pflug, *Tunisian Interior*, 1958. Tempera on canvas, 91 x 71 cm. Toronto, Christiane Pflug Estate (Photo: Edward P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario).



Figure 10. Christiane Pflug, *Birdcage with Pears*, 1958. Tempera on canvas, 46.4 x 61.6 cm. Kingston, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University (Photo: Edward P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario).



frames the view from the Pflug home on Birch Avenue (1967–72). Rather the rooftop of the school serves as a transitional space similar to the balcony on Woodlawn Avenue. Instead of dolls or children, two small birds are featured. In *Cottingham School in Winter I* (1968, fig. 12) they stand near two pools of

Figure 11 Christiane Pflug, *Kitchen Door with Ursula*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 164.8 x 193.2 cm. Winnipeg, Winnipeg Art Gallery, purchased with the assistance of the Women's Committee and the Winnipeg Foundation (Photo: Ernest Mayer, Winnipeg Art Gallery).

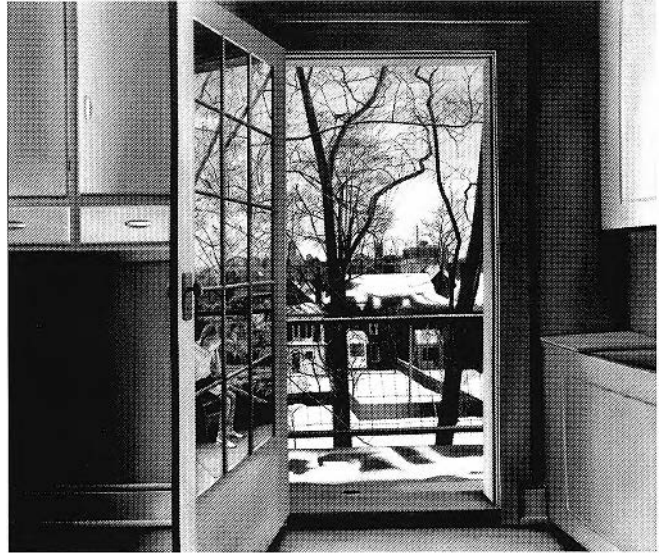


Figure 12. Christiane Pflug, *Cottingham School in Winter I*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 110.5 x 100.5 cm. Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, gift of Michael Pflug (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).



melted snow. In *Cottingham School with Parked Cars and Playground* (1969), they are similarly positioned on the flooded roof in springtime, hemmed in on either side by the sinister reflections of trees in full foliage. The relation of these birds to Esther and Ursula may be deduced from a letter written from the

Figure 13. Christiane Pflug, *With the Black Flag*, 1971. Oil on canvas, 137.2 x 142.2 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, donated by the Ontario Heritage Foundation (Photo: Art Gallery of Ontario).



Toronto Islands shortly after the move to Birch Avenue. The Islands were the scene of happy family excursions, and Pflug enjoyed drawing there. During the summer of 1967 she went there alone to work, supported by a Canada Council grant. "It's nice over there," she wrote, "but without the children hardly what it used to be, only the little ducks and the little geese are a bit of a consolation ..." <sup>77</sup> In one drawing a Canada goose and a family of ducks are in a small foreground pool, separated by a sandbar from the expanse of lake and the looming Toronto skyline. <sup>78</sup>

In Kelly's *Document* the final series documenting the child's entry into the educational system represents a critical moment of separation. Kelly tells us that the place assigned to the child within the school radically displaces the mother's representation of the child as a part of herself. <sup>79</sup> Intriguingly, Pflug's "Cottingham School" series coincided with a period of diminishing control over her daughters as they lost interest in the imaginative play of their childhood, the small world of the dolls, and as young adolescents invested in spaces and relations beyond the confines of the domestic. Finding this process difficult to accept, Pflug's expression of resentment reveals an acute understanding of the mother as abject in our culture. She writes: "If it is true that every man or boy has somehow to kill his father, the

same is true of the mothers, who survive in people's imagination and dreamworld as horrible, oppressive hags. I feel daily how I am made to join this company, but I do not want this ... I refuse to become something fixed that is denied further development." <sup>80</sup>

Spatially the "Cottingham School" series progresses like a zoom lens; as the frame is extended into the space of the encroaching city, the viewpoint is raised to the level of the flagpole. In her final series, represented by *With the Black Flag* (1971, fig. 13), the transitional space of the school drops off entirely and with it the rhythm of the *fort-da*. Now the viewpoint is level with the horizon and its vanishing point, described by Kelly as "the vanishing reality which defines the subject in terms of a lost object." <sup>81</sup> For, it is at the horizon, you will recall, that Lacan locates "the lack that constitutes castration anxiety." Kelly closes with a reworking of Lacan's formula for the barred subject (S/s) that succinctly conveys the dilemma of the mother/artist faced simultaneously with the inevitable moment of separation from the child, a separation that reiterates "a lack always already inscribed and impossible to efface," and the completion of the work that documents it. <sup>82</sup>

(WHAT WILL I DO?)

s

Conclusion

While the salient changes in Pflug's paintings arising from each change of address correspond to her practice of working the specificity of place, I have argued that the deepening of perspective, from the intimacy of the Tunisian interiors to the cityscape of the Cottingham School and Flag series, marks the trajectory of the mother's desire in the process of representing her loss. To understand this visualization of the mother/child relationship as a replay of the daughter's loss is to understand the self-cancelling temporality that makes time stand still in Pflug's paintings. This is only one trajectory within a practice of great complexity that warrants more analysis than is possible here. <sup>83</sup> Yet, it situates this artist in relation to the tradition of melancholic discourse and claims her work as a counter-narrative that confers legitimacy upon women's loss in culture. And in this lies its pleasure.



## Notes

My interest in Christiane Pflug began with my M.A. research at Carleton University and continued during my Doctoral work at the University of Essex. In both instances I am deeply indebted to the generous accommodation of Ann Davis who shared extensive documentation she collected to write *Somewhere Waiting*. References to Pflug's correspondence and interviews are from Davis's archive. I am most grateful to Michael Pflug for making his collection of Christiane's paintings available and for copyright permission for reproductions. This article has been much improved by the comments of my anonymous reviewer.

- 1 Christa Wolf, "A Letter about Unequivocal and Ambiguous Meaning, Definiteness and Indefiniteness; about Ancient Conditions and New View-Scopes; about Objectivity," *Feminist Aesthetics*, ed. Gisela Ecker, trans. Harriet Anderson (London, 1985), 95–107, esp. 105.
- 2 Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina*, trans. P. Boehm (New York and London, 1990).
- 3 Jacques Lacan, "Dieu et la jouissance de la femme," *Le séminaire XX: Encore, 1972–73* (Paris, 1975), 68. For an English translation see Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York and London, 1982), 137–48, esp. 144. Lacan proposes that phallic sexuality assigns "The Woman" to a position of fantasy rather than a position of "being."
- 4 Mary Allodi, "Christiane Pflug," *artscanada*, 174/175 (Dec. 1972/Jan. 1973), 42–47.
- 5 Ann Davis, *Somewhere Waiting: The Life and Art of Christiane Pflug* (Toronto, 1991).
- 6 For an overview of women artists in Toronto during the 1960s, see Christine Conley, "Daughters in Exile: Negotiating the Spaces of the Avant-Garde, Christiane Pflug and Joyce Wieland," M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1990.
- 7 Interview with Mary Allodi by Ann Davis (29 October 1986). Unpublished typescript.
- 8 Christiane Pflug, "Autobiographical Statement with Avrom Isaacs," unpublished typescript (Toronto, ca. 1966).
- 9 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," *Reflections: Walter Benjamin Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), 177–92, esp. 181–82.
- 10 Pflug, "Autobiographical Statement."
- 11 Valerie Elliot, "Intensity is the Essence," *Globe and Mail*, supplement, 8 June 1968, 11.
- 12 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne (London, 1977), 229.
- 13 Children were evacuated from cities during World War II to relative safety in the countryside.
- 14 Breuer and Freud declared in 1893, "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences." Freud related the fixation to the traumatic experience that started the illness, characteristic of hysteria, to the experience of shell shock in soldiers who otherwise escaped physical harm. Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey (London, 1953–74), XVIII, 290. Freud's theory has been applied more generally to the experience of trauma by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London, 1996).
- 15 Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. Georgina Paul, Rachel McNicholl and Jeremy Gaines (London, 1996), 103.
- 16 Ann Davis claims Pflug's work shared the concern with "actuality" central to the realism of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, yet differed in being "poignantly subjective." Davis, *Somewhere Waiting*, 177–78. Benjamin criticized the melancholy of *Neue Sachlichkeit*; their description of a world beyond redemption was complicit with the political paralysis and moral decay of Weimar culture. See Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst, 1993), 9. My argument is that Pflug's project involved a struggle with the threat of meaninglessness and a concerted attempt to redeem her "objects" in the psychoanalytic sense.
- 17 See Christine Conley, "The Gendering of Allegory: Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* and Benjamin's *Melancholy Dialectics*," *Differential Aesthetics: Art Practices, Philosophies and Feminist Understandings*, eds Nicola Foster and Penny Florence (Aldershot, UK, 2001).
- 18 The device of the *Rückfigur* was familiar to Pflug through the work of the German Romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich. See Davis, *Somewhere Waiting*, 226.
- 19 Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" (1919) *The Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*, trans. Joan Riviere (London, 1925), 368–407, esp. 369.
- 20 Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 407.
- 21 Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 386.
- 22 Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')." *New Literary History*, 7 (1976), 525–48.
- 23 Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" 399.
- 24 Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, 1992).
- 25 Gary Michael Dault, "A Delicate and Stirring Show," *Toronto Star*, 18 July 1975.
- 26 Atina Grossmann, "The New Woman and the Rationalization of Sexuality in Weimar Germany," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds Ann Snitow et al. (New York, 1983), 153–71.
- 27 Letter from Herbert Dahl to Ann Davis (6 December 1979).
- 28 Christiane Pflug, Excerpt from memoir "Childhood" published in *Provincial Essays*, V (Toronto, 1987), 30–35, esp. 35.
- 29 Christiane Pflug, "Childhood," typescript of memoir (Wuppertal, 1955) in the collection of Ann Davis, 2.
- 30 Pflug, "Autobiographical Statement."
- 31 Pflug, "Autobiographical Statement."
- 32 Davis, *Somewhere Waiting*, 49.
- 33 Elliot, "Intensity is the Essence," 12.

- 34 Letter to Michael (28 January 1968), published in *Brick* (Winter 1987), 5.
- 35 J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London, 1973), 389. Klein's essays concerning infantile anxiety, the depressive position and reparation are collected in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946–1963* (London, 1975), esp. 25–42, 71–80.
- 36 Hanna Segal, "A Psycho-Analytical Approach to Aesthetics," *New Directions in Psychoanalysis*, eds Melanie Klein et al. (London, 1955), 384–405, esp. 397.
- 37 Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia*, 8.
- 38 Shakespeare's petulant prince is the model of melancholic anguish in the work of Benjamin, Freud, Winnicott and Lacan.
- 39 Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia*, 15.
- 40 Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia*, 15.
- 41 Melancholia is also allegorized as a woman. In Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholia* (1621) the author casts the malady of melancholia as ma-lady; the writing of his opus is the antidote to "the evil genius of his mistress melancholy," Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia* 246–47. Albrecht Dürer's engraving, *Melancolia I*, 1514, is a prime example in visual art.
- 42 Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia*, 155.
- 43 Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia*, 235n. 8.
- 44 Sigmund Freud, "Femininity" (1933), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. J. Strachey and Anna Freud (London, 1953–74), XXII, 112–35, esp. 129.
- 45 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), *The Collected Papers*, IV, 152–70, esp. 155.
- 46 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 155.
- 47 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 168.
- 48 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 163.
- 49 Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia*, 42–43.
- 50 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G.C. Gill (New York, 1985), 70.
- 51 Schiesari reminds us that "Mourning and Melancholia" marks Freud's own "discovery" of the superego, through his observation of the "split" ego formation that produces the loquacious self-criticism of the melancholic subject; Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia*, 54.
- 52 Irigaray, *Speculum*, 68.
- 53 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. L.S. Roudiez (New York, 1989), 27–28.
- 54 Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, 1988), 120.
- 55 Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 156.
- 56 She wrote to Michael in November 1954 from Wuppertal: "Sometimes I am longing so much I could explode for Mammi. Since I have started to be a little critical I have been so ugly to her and have made her so many reproaches. It was not her fault that everything was too much for her and what went wrong with me ... I like to be sometimes with her again, the warmth in her eyes when she is happy and her hands and her voice and all. Only I know that after awhile it wouldn't work any more and I probably will always only have a longing for that which one just does not have, and a nostalgia for the paradise which one cannot imagine. What one is feeling only sometimes deep inside for which one is seeking again and again ..."
- 57 Luce Irigaray, "The Gesture in Psychoanalysis," *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. T. Brennan (London, 1989), 127–38, esp. 132.
- 58 Davis has suggested that the beads adorning the doll refer to the Bedouin necklaces Christiane wore. Conversation with Ann Davis (7 January 1989).
- 59 Pflug, *Provincial Essays*, V, 32.
- 60 Constance Mungall, "Christianne [sic] Pflug," *Ontario Homes and Living*, 8 (September 1964), 16–17.
- 61 The vase of flowers, the basket and the dish may also be associated with the iconography of Mariolatry, for instance in Hugo van der Goes' *Portinari Altarpiece*.
- 62 Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 99–118, esp. 109.
- 63 Julia Kristeva, "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," *Desire in Language*, ed. L.S. Roudiez, trans. T. Gora et al. (New York, 1980), 237–70.
- 64 Marina Warner has described the potent spell of the Virgin for the schoolgirl: "for some years I could not enter a church without pain at all the safety and beauty of the salvation I had forsaken." Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London, 1976), xxi. Pflug, likewise, expressed regret at her break with the church, and that she could no longer look to it for salvation. Davis, *Somewhere Waiting*, 78.
- 65 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, 1977), 103.
- 66 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 72.
- 67 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 106.
- 68 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (London and New York, 1992), 20–21.
- 69 Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 427.
- 70 Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* (London, 1983), xvi.
- 71 Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, xvi.
- 72 Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, 108.
- 73 Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, 189.
- 74 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 16–17.
- 75 Christiane expresses her sadness to Michael's sister that the girls no longer have frog tea parties and prefer reading to drawing. Letter to Luise Pflug (16 November 1965).
- 76 The black doll figures in several canvases. Here, her condition may refer to Pflug's consuming fear of destitution. In *On the Balcony II* (1963), the black doll is presented alongside Pflug's Tunisian objects, suggesting the artist's nostalgia for Tunis and the place of North Africa in the European imaginary as a pre-industrial culture. The significance of the doll in relation to Pflug's sense of exile introduces issues beyond the scope of this article.

- 77 Letter to Anton and Rebecca van Dalen, friends of the Pflug's in Toronto, who had recently moved to New York City (16 July 1967).
- 78 Reproduced in *The Drawings of Christiane Pflug*, exh. cat., Winnipeg Art Gallery (Winnipeg, 1979), 79.
- 79 Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, 169.
- 80 Letter to Karen du Toit, cited in Davis, *Somewhere Waiting*, 270–71.
- 81 Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, 78.
- 82 Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, 189.
- 83 Recent literary studies of German women writers of Pflug's generation examine the negotiation of collective memory through autobiographical modes: a possible framework for positioning Pflug in relation to post-war German identity. See Elaine Martin, ed., *Gender, Patriarchy and Fascism in the Third Reich* (Detroit, 1990).