

puppies

and

babies

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a.l. steiner

text by maggie nelson



in loving memory of

dolly bass

dexter fowler

goose steiner-childs

max “maximum” dodge

oliver dupuy-spencer

“I believe that all ethical relating, within or between species, is knit from the silk-strong thread of ongoing alertness to otherness-in-relation. We are not one, and being depends on getting on together.”

- Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*, 2003





## On A. L. Steiner's *Puppies and Babies*

On Mother's Day 2012, the cover review of the *New York Times Book Review* opened: "No subject offers a greater opportunity for terrible writing than motherhood. . . . Just as the sports guys mythologize the athlete, mommy writers mythologize the child, the bond, the late nights and the little toothless grin breaking out like sunshine from behind a thundercloud of tears. (I actually read that in a book. A book someone published. No, I'm not naming names.)"

I actually read this in a national newspaper. On Mother's Day. And no, I'm not naming names, because the internalized matrophobia, the *aesthetic* unimaginativeness, really, here on display—is too run-of-the-mill for the byline to matter. Nevertheless, it's clear that the propaganda is strong. (As is the age-old trope of disavowing anything associated with the (sentimental, mundane, soft-minded) feminine as a ticket to (critical, artistic, human) seriousness—which is why you will find so many women in the mainstream doing it.) This may be one reason why A. L. Steiner says that she originally proposed *Puppies and Babies* as a sort of joke: "the joke originating from the fact that sometimes I'd find myself shooting puppies/dogs and babies and what for? Were they part of my 'work'? How did/could they fit in to the highbrow genre of labels often attached to my work—installation-based, for mature audiences, political, etc?"

These are interesting questions. They did not occur to me, however, while beholding *Puppies and Babies*. I'd like to think this is because the dreary binary which would pit collaged snapshots of puppies and babies and their myriad companions against "highbrow" genres of art—just like the dreary Mother's Day cover of the *New York Times Book Review*—have come to strike me as malodorous missives from the mainstream: at times unavoidable, but best left unsniffed. Such missives aim to shut down inquiry into spheres ripe for it with a host of predictable, preemptive dismissals, many of which were memorably catalogued by Eve Sedgwick re: queer scholarship: "*Don't ask; You shouldn't know*. It didn't happen; it doesn't make any difference; it didn't mean anything; it doesn't have interpretative consequences. Stop asking just here; stop asking just now; we know in advance the kind of difference that could be made by the invocation of this difference; it makes no difference; it doesn't mean."

*Puppies and Babies*—like Steiner's work more generally—refuses to stop asking, or to stop asking just now, or to presume to know in advance what kind of difference could be made by the invocation of *this* difference. What difference? Here, it's two-fold. First, there is the difference of what we might call—after Susan Fraiman—"sodomitical maternity." Fraiman coins this phrase to signify a woman's access, "*even as a mother* to non-normative, nonprocreative sexuality, to sexuality



in excess of the dutifully instrumental.” Sodomitical maternity is a close corollary of “queer pregnancy”; together, Fraiman wants these two terms to disrupt the tired binary—common in queer circles as well as in homophobic ones—that places “femininity, reproduction, and normativity on one side and masculinity, sexuality, and queer resistance on the other.”

For a variety of reasons—some of them historically and politically logical, some of them unwittingly (or uncaringly) fag-centered or misogynist—this binary has proven remarkably resilient. Rather than fade away with the rise of sodomitical parenthood of all stripes, it has in fact reached a kind of apotheosis, often posing as a last, desperate stand against homo- and hetero-normativity, both. (See Lee Edelman’s fierce polemic *No Future*, which rages against something he calls “reproductive futurism”; think also of the supposedly hyper-radical, anti-capitalist, anti-breeding mantra, “don’t produce and don’t reproduce,” most recently quoted to me by the otherwise brilliant and visionary Nayland Blake.) The second difference of *Puppies and Babies* is, of course, that made by the puppies: the insistent, variable presence of the non-human—here, the canine—which blessedly disrupts the rote speciesism that posits the human as the center of the living universe.

Now, baby-lovers may gravitate to the baby photos, dog-lovers to the dogs, but the roughly equal wallspace given to each in *Puppies and Babies* definitively places interspecies love on par with human-human love, no matter what your preference. (Some photos feature both, in which case there’s no need to choose.) This equal loving allows Steiner to vault over the dismally limited and misguided view of pet-loving as a sort of consolation prize for the childless, or as lesbian cliché (cf. Gertrude Stein and Basket). *If I can’t have a penis, I’ll have a baby; if I can’t have a baby, I’ll have a dog, castrated wolf that I am.* I’m not kidding, Freud really goes there. “Freud obviously knows nothing about the fascination exerted by wolves and the meaning of their silent call, the call to become-wolf,” Deleuze & Guattari thankfully shout back. “Castration, lack, substitution: a tale told by an overconscious idiot who has no understanding of multiplicities as forms of the unconscious.”





Steiner has captured such multiplicities over the years, seemingly blithely, on film. Unafraid of the bogeyman of bestiality, the exhibit also offers a cheeky, euphoric response to all those right-wingers who have knocked themselves out with “slippery slope” logic re: gay marriage, whereby queers at the altar serve as the gateway drug to human-on-animal action.



As in Steiner and A. K. Burns’ recent “sociosexual” video, *Community Action Center*, the cast of characters is familiar—these are portraits of friends, not ethnographic samplings. There are consequently many recognizable parties—golden-hued, pregnant Victoria Robinson and Nicole Eisenman; Anna Sew-Hoy rejoicing on the beach with baby Lee; Gwen Smith and son River; artists Eve Fowler, Suzanne Wright, K8 Hardy, Nao Bustamante and many others with their beloved dogs; and several more formal-seeming portraits of Steiner’s girlfriend, Rachel Berks, with their dog Goose (since deceased, so the installation becomes a memorial of sorts).



Many of the dog photographs take place in bed or in nature—two of a dog’s favorite places to be. A naked woman spoons two dogs at once. Celeste Dupuy-Spencer squats with her dog Oliver at the edge of a lake, as if both are contemplating a long journey. Babies get born, cry, goof around, ride small tractors, pinch nipples, get held. Often, they nurse. One nurses—incredibly—while the nursing mother does a handstand. Another nurses at the beach. Alex Auder, pregnant in leather dom gear, pretends to give birth to an inflatable turtle. One dog mounts a stuffed tiger. Another gets festooned with orange flowers. Two pregnant women hold up their sundresses to rub their naked bellies together, a friendly frottage. As in *Community Action Center*, a handful of guys (trans, cis, andro, fag...), appear now and then, as if to say, *This play space is not closed to you, should you wish to play here too*. The installation radiates a sublimity of adoration.



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Beholding such plenty, I wonder if Fraiman's sodomitical maternity needs some revision. While necessary from time to time, the effort to preserve, for self-identified women, a sexuality apart from—or in excess of—their reproductive function feels a little retro and irrelevant here, especially as many of those pictured (I'm guessing) likely didn't conceive their children via intercourse. Also, Fraiman's definition risks repressing the erotics of childbearing in order to make space for erotics elsewhere, whereas *Puppies and Babies* eschews such a cleavage. Instead we get all the messy, raucous perversities to be found in pregnant and non-pregnant bodies, in nursing, in skinny dipping in a waterfall with one's dog, in cavorting in crumpled bed sheets, in the daily work of caretaking and witness—including the erotic witness of Steiner's camera, most obvious in snapshots of her nude lover, but present throughout. (If you share Wayne Koestenbaum's happily prurient sentiment, "If I attend a photo show that lacks nudes, I consider the visit a waste," then you've come to the right place.) Perhaps this is where "queer pregnancy" comes in (and what pregnancy isn't queer? an open question). For the phrase doesn't just mean "pregnant queers," whatever that might entail. Rather, it is a reminder that any bodily experience can be made new and strange, that nothing we do in this life need be shoveled into a box with a lid crammed on it, that no one set of bodily practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative.

The casual style of the snapshots, which have been culled from Steiner's archive of photos of friends, lovers, and dogs, inevitably brings to mind Nan Goldin's 1986 "visual diary" of her tribe, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. As the titles of *Ballad* and *Puppies* alone suggest, however, their moods differ sharply, in ways that matter. To take but one example: one of the most Goldin-esque photos in *Puppies and Babies* is an interior shot, just out-of-focus, of Layla Childs (Steiner's ex), half-dressed and staring expressionlessly at the camera, bathed in a dim red light. But instead of sporting a tear-stained face or bruises from a recent battering (a la *Ballad*), the woman is pumping milk from her breasts via a "hands free" pumping bra and double electric pump. Pumping milk is, for many women, a sharply private activity. It can also be physically and emotionally challenging, as it reminds the nursing mother of her animal status: just another mammal, its milk being siphoned from its glands. Beyond photographs in breast pump manuals, however, images of milk expression really have no place in our culture. It isn't even taboo—it's just nowhere. So the presence of Steiner's camera here—and the steadfast stare of her subject back—feels jarring and exciting. This is especially so when you consider how Goldin (or Ryan McGinley, or Richard Billingham, or Larry Clark, for that matter) often make us feel as though we have glimpsed something radically intimate by evoking danger, pain, illness, nihilism, or abjection. The transmission of fluids here is about nourishment. The difference of Steiner's vision—and her generation, perhaps—becomes clear.



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*Don't produce and don't reproduce.* But really there is no such thing as reproduction, as Andrew Solomon has recently noted. There is only production. No lack, only desiring machines. “Flying anuses, speeding vaginas, there is no castration” (D & G). When all the mythologies about reproduction have been set aside, we see that humans, as a species, are going nowhere. “We are growing toward extinction, children or no children. That the joke of evolution is that it is a teleology without a point, that we, like all animals, are a project that issues in nothing” (Adam Phillips). Is this depressing? Maybe, or maybe sometimes. For Phillips, this joke signifies the birth of human sexuality. It may also be a ticket to rejoining our fellow, non-human inquirers on earth, to re-becoming-animal—to enjoying, rather than abusing, their company. That Steiner’s scrappy installation draws us closer into this holy fellowship is cause for celebration and wonder.

-- Maggie Nelson  
January 22, 2013

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puppies  
and  
babies

by a.l. steiner  
text by maggie nelson  
design by otherwild

thank you  
alex auder, lui + mo; math bass, dolly + black joan;  
rachel berks + pocket; nao bustamente + fufu ; aj  
blandford, layla child's, leroy + arrow; pauline boudry;  
cuba; tim davis + seth rubin; celeste dupuy-spencer,  
freeway + oliver; donnie cervantes; dean daderko; nicole  
eisenman, victoria robinson, george + freddy; eve fowler  
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this is \_\_\_\_\_ out of 100.