

Procreative Selections

[Noémie Merleau-Ponty](#), May '17



Prune Nourry, Milk Pool, 2010, Concrete and projection.

On the 26th and 27th of April 2017, I organized a public engagement and multidisciplinary conference in an MK2 cinema located in Palais de Tokyo, the "temple of contemporary art" in Paris,

as many call it. *Procreative Selections* was the result of a collaboration between an artist, Prune Nourry, and myself, an anthropologist. For two days, nineteen speakers who are artists, social scientists and clinicians gathered around topics relating to medical, technological and social interventions in reproduction. We heard talks and debated about sex selection, pre and neonatal diagnosis, genome editing, paternity tests, egg freezing, and chimeric hybridizations in Asia, Europe and the USA. Our speakers gave insight from psychology, biology, demography, anthropology, sociology, history and art.

It was an exhilarating event to organize. I have a special attraction for discussions that do not rest on expected boundaries or methodologies, so when Prune Nourry suggested that we could organize a conference mixing her world and mine, I said yes instantly. As an ethnographer, I started by getting familiar with her different projects and tried to find a common theme, which appeared quite clearly as the one of selection in reproductive practices. As an anthropologist, I decided to mix perspectives on different countries and contexts to provide a comparative approach in which each frame of reference finds food for thought through the expression of the other ones.

We brought together academics, artists, journalists, family and friends, and engaged in informative and accessible conversations about selections in procreation. We adopted a procreative stance, underlining the links between art and reproduction, between actions, choices, projects and births, putting biology away from nature, and body processes in their crafting dynamics.

Francois Ansermet, a psychanalyst who has just published a book with Prune Nourry on her work[1], told us that art is a space to represent what societies might have difficulties to think, their contradictions and their symbolic challenges in an age of rapid biotechnological change. In that sense, art is not a mediator between science and other social spaces, but an experiment in itself[2], as much procreative as the topics it investigates, as much procreative as the other types of approaches and methodologies.

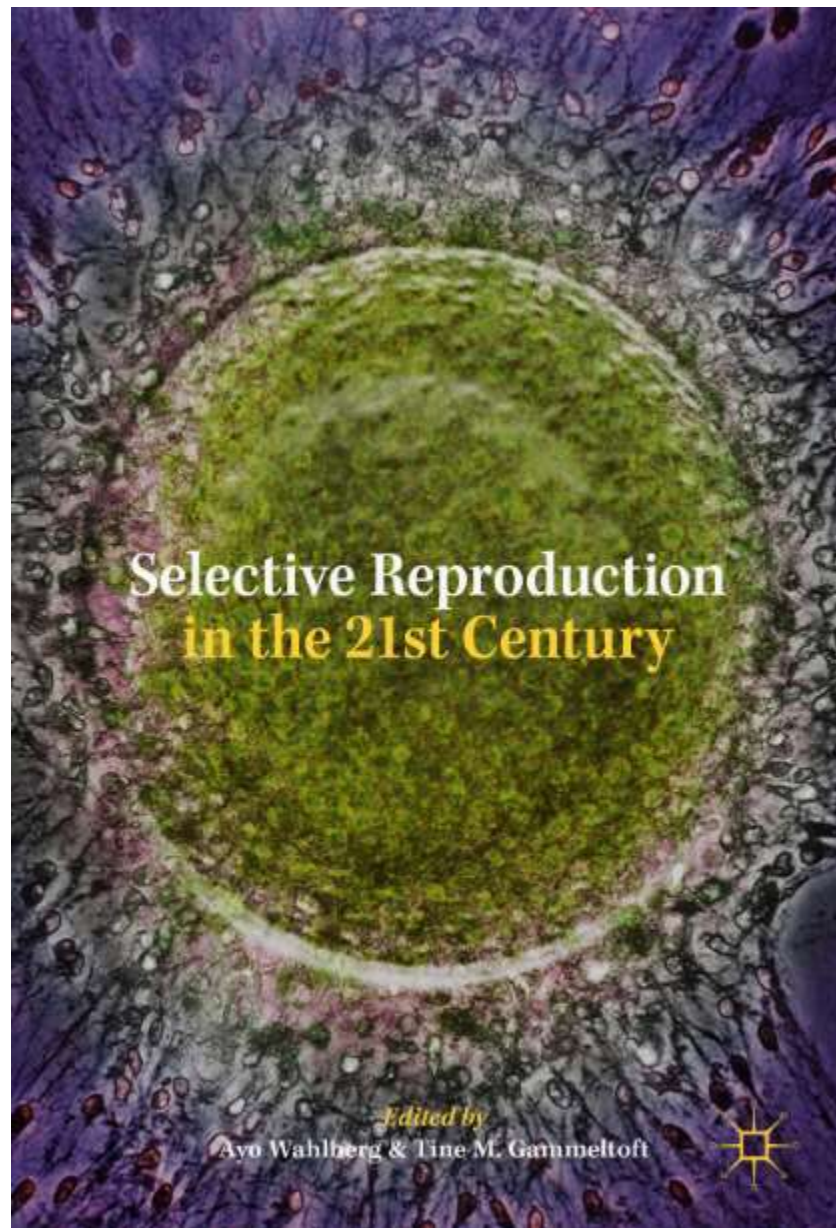
I created each panel in conversation with a project developed by [Prune Nourry](#). The conference's emblem image, *Milk Pool*, is a picture of a pregnant body emerging from a white background and with an ultrasound projected on the lower part of the belly. I particularly like this picture because it shows the ultrasound as a part of a lived pregnancy. The woman and the foetus are in the body, as Emily Martin would put it[3], and the ultrasound is an intimate player of their emergence. Highly visible, these bodies are also recreated by our imaginations, under the milk, behind the closed (dreamy?) eyes, somewhere in between the skin and the electricity used to project the blue shape. They are also the products of a process, the creative one.

This project started after the artist travelled to New Delhi, in India, where she assisted and filmed the delivery of a little girl with Down's syndrome. After the delivery, the family disappeared and no one knows what happened to this new-born, though many assume a fatal outcome.

[Holy Daughters](#) and [Terracotta Daughters](#) are two projects addressing the topic of gender imbalance in India and China. The demographers Christophe Z. Guilmoto and Valentine Becquet presented some conclusions of their research about son preferences in Asia. In 2010, 125.6 million girls were never born in the world and there are 58.8 million more men than women on this planet. Sex selection has always existed recalls Valentine Becquet about Vietnam, through prayers at temples, infanticide or neglect. And birthing a boy is a craft learnt among peers mixing traditional techniques (food, calendar management or use of psychic powers) with modern ones. But, as states Christophe Z. Guilmoto, "since the 1980s, the sex ratio at birth rose from 105 (normal level) to 110-130 male births per 100 female births in several Asian and East European countries. This increase was mostly caused by sex selective abortions. It will result in a growing increase in the proportions of males in older age groups till the end of the century." Three preconditions explain the reasons for cultural son preference in patrilineal societies, sex selection technology (ultrasound, fetal blood test, preimplantation), and low fertility reducing chances of male offspring.

Milk Pool could be located anywhere on the planet and one dynamic of this conference was to avoid an easy divide between Asian sex selective practices and the rest of the world. This aspect was well underlined by the talk of Ayo Wahlberg who presented a book he is editing with Tine M. Gammeltoft on selective reproduction in the XXIth century. Differentiating assisted reproductive

technologies and selective reproductive technologies, the major shift is from giving nature a 'helping hand' to providing a 'guiding hand'. One important aspect of these selections happening around the world are their routinization.



Indeed, two talks by Carine Vassy and Joëlle Vailly about the biopolitics of pre and neonatal diagnosis focused on cystic fibrosis and Down's syndrome in France, and showed that selecting births without these particularities had become routinized in the hexagon, sustaining the valuation of lives without special needs. Their talks accompanied this picture of an European XIXth or early XXth century anatomical plate of a pregnancy recovered by acupuncture needles:



Etrange Planche Anatomique #6 2016, Reflexology Print, Acupuncture Needles

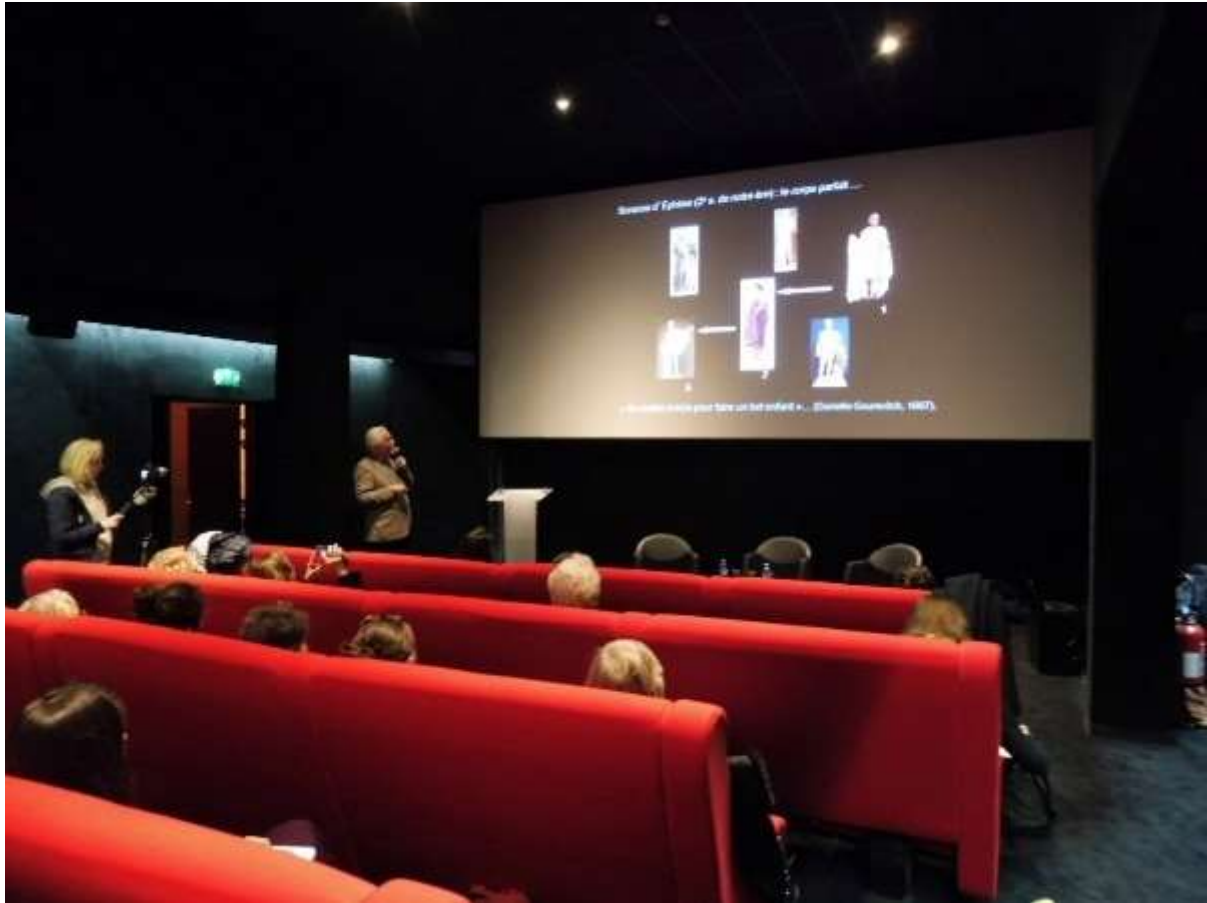
Regarding Down's syndrome in France, we learnt that some tests form part of a daily biomedical accompaniment of pregnancies. Even if these tests are not mandatory, in the public health system, they are organized in such a way that consent is not given enough time to be fully acknowledged (1 minute spent on Down's syndrome test, signature included in 30 minutes medical consultation). This hyper routinization results in a very high number of diagnosis, 84% compared to 27% in the Netherlands. This movement is part of a more general dynamic of sustaining what Joëlle Vailly calls biopolitics of a "life of quality".



From left to right: Carine Vassy, Simone Bateman and Joëlle Vailly discussing pre and neonatal tests in France.

Politics were at the centre of a lot of talks. Marine Poulain, head of an in vitro fertilization laboratory in a private hospital, presented "Le droit de choisir" [The right to choose], a manifesto signed by 200 French Assisted Reproductive Technologies medical doctors and biologists. This text states that they help their patients to access techniques that are not available in France due to conservative legislation[4]. Ban of egg freezing for personal reasons or egg donation shortage due to a complete absence of financial compensation were particularly debated. Selection, in that sense, referred to the political and legal ones over technical options. Another aspect of selection and politics were addressed about the USA. Mélanie Gourarier presented her research on the use of paternal test in the context of migrant family uniting. She showed how the American state imposes a genetic based vision of fatherhood over foreign family record books, and how this particular vision of fatherhood is used as a base to select which families can be reunited across borders.

In a period where new technologies are arising very fast and accompanied by a consumption logic (see Prune Nourry's performance: [The procreative dinner](#)), we opened a space for time: the time of history and the time for debate. Jean-Louis Fischer recalled that Europe has a long history of trying "to make beautiful babies", which he brilliantly overviewed through three periods: the seeds period until the end of the XVIIth century, the eggs' period until the birth of Louise Brown and the contemporary "procreatic" period[5].



Jean-Louis Fischer talking about “the art of making beautiful babies” across European history.

Jennifer Merchant, a political scientist, gave some insight in the recent debates in ethics committee in France and the USA about genome editing, this technique consisting of cutting and replacing genes that could be used in procreation [6]. One important aspect highlighted by the National Academies of Science was the need to develop more information campaign for the public in order to stimulate citizen engagement in discussing the issues at stake.

We finished the conference with the topic of multispecies hybridization. Building on one of the first project by Prune Nourry, [Les bébés domestiques](#). As she writes on her website: “Sculptures made of silicone, Nourry’s *Bébés Domestiques* combine characteristics of human children and dogs as they reflect on the notions of pet fetishization and genetic manipulation. These pieces invite viewers to question the borderline between humans and animals, which has considerably evolved through time.” Looking not at the animal in the human but at the human in the animal, I offered a brief overview of the reactions I glimpsed on the internet with my colleague Dr Katie Dow after a recent publication on human-pig chimeras made at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in Juan Carlos Izpisua Belmonte’s laboratory. This research aims at experimenting on the production of human organs in other species. It is interesting because it shows how our regeneration is engrafted in other species reproductive manipulation and how our own valuation of humanity over other expressions of the animal kingdom can help understand the reactions. Indeed, a lot of reactions were to be read about the transgressive aspect of such chimera, but I could find none about the animal rights. Finally, the artist [ORLAN](#), presented a talk valuating hybridity in her work and Prune Nourry’s one.



Let's hybridize one another!

ORLAN Remix – Romain Gary, Costa-Gavras, Deleuze et Guattari, 2009, vidéo, 03'52"

She also gave a performance based on her collaboration with the feminist band Chicks on Speed where she advocated for "NO BABY NO". She stressed the need to stop making babies in a time of ecological crisis, which recalled the Donna Haraway radical proposition "Make kin not babies!" to be found in [her last book](#)[7].

Taking the time to organize such a conference and bring together multiple perspectives out of their academic inner circle of specialists was a way to experiment on a space for dialogue where symbolic orders are discussed and technological innovation's speed slowed down. One interesting outcome is the importance of contexts for vocabulary use as some discussions were clearly informed by different understandings of a same word. "Malformation" for a medical doctor relates to congenital

malformation when, for a wider audience, it can have a larger sense of anomaly or even social inadequacy.

From my point of view, the experiment is a success as people coming from very different backgrounds left with comforting thank you. "You should organize one every year now" even told me one discussant Marie-Sarah Adenis. Well, for now, Ayo Wahlberg's talk will be online soon on the ReproSoc YouTube channel, and I can't stress strongly enough the value of public engagement.

[1] Prune Nourry and Francois Ansermet, *Serendipity*, Actes Sud, 2017

[2] Felicity Callard, Des Fitzgerald and Angela Woods, 2015, *Interdisciplinary collaboration in action: tracking the signal, tracing the noise*, Palgrave Communications 1 (15019), p.3 <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/articles/palcomms201519>

[3] Emily Martin, 2001, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, Beacon Press.

[4] René Frydman, 2017, *Le droit de choisir. Manifeste des médecins et biologistes de la procréation médicale assistée*, Seuil.

[5] Jean-Louis Fischer, 2009, *L'art de faire de beaux enfants : Histoire de la callipédie*, Albin Michel.

[6] <http://nationalacademies.org/gene-editing/consensus-study/>

<http://www.inserm.fr/qu-est-ce-que-l-inserm/l-ethique-a-l-inserm/saisines-et-notes-du-comite-d-ethique>

[7] Donna Haraway, 2016, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press.