

Hagar Tenenbaum — *Is it dirty*  
Opening November 2nd, 6pm to 8pm

## Premature

### *Sharing organs*

We come from creatures who expelled their progeny from their bodies when they were merely single cells. They were sent off sealed in, surrounded by fats and proteins, and encapsulated by layers of sacs and membranes. They hid their offspring in carefully selected cradles—in the warm cracks of decomposing logs, the neutral substrate of birch leaves, the vernal pools of temporary wetlands, and the damp undersides of emergent rocks, lodged between water and air.

Most species on earth are still oviparous—also known as egg laying—reproducing with little or no embryonic development inside the mother. In the case of hens, they look for secluded, dark corners. The hen broods, tucking her eggs underneath and turning them throughout the day to prevent the embryo from sticking to the shell.

So how did we come to grow inside a body? The viviparity of mammals evolved through a series of gradual adaptations. Eggs were retained inside the mother's body for longer and longer periods. Internal gestation has been attributed to the intervention of an agent that occupies the disputed territory between the living and the inorganic: the virus. The virus acted as a compromise formation between mother and offspring, allowing for suspension, so the mother's body didn't clock the eggs as foreign objects to be expelled. Structures slowly developed to enable the embryo to continue to be held and mature inside, the most notable being the placenta. Mother and fetus triangulate with this shared organ, which acts as mediation in the first degree, an interface operating via osmosis.

To complicate this inside-out Möbius, the viruses at work are theorized to be endogenous retroviruses, known as fossil viruses, ancient remnants of previous viral infections that have become embedded inside the host's genome and passed down through generations, stowed away for future recursions. Development as novelty is thrown into question, growth only looks like progress at first glance, if you're not considering that the organism is following all available paths toward ancient aims: the creation and cancellation of tension. That is, all development is repetition. More precisely, it is the reactivation of a viral drive which looks past the living vesicle. A wedge between the domestic and foreign, which appears at a peculiar moment in circular time.

### *The cloacal neighborhood*

"It is not for nothing that the genital apparatus remains the neighbor of the cloaca"  
—Lou Andreas-Salomé, *"Anal" and "Sexual"* (1916)

The majority of bird species do not have external genitalia. Instead, they have a single, undivided chamber called the cloaca, a vent where the excretory, urinary, and reproductive pathways converge. Mating involves a "cloacal kiss" in which two cloacas swell, align, and touch, if only briefly. The expulsion of waste and generation of life follow the same movement, contraction and release through a shared rim.

Before we have genitals in the womb, we have a cloaca. Through processes of branching, folding, straightening, and rupturing, the cloaca separates into urogenital and anorectal canals. This is the story we hear most often about development, that it is a linear movement along the line of differentiation, separation, and specialization.

But what is now parsed was once conflated, and the degree to which it is still fused, occluded. As the anal zone becomes the psychological representative of death and the genital the ambassador of life, we shore up the partition, guarding against the catastrophic links of baby with waste product and feces with cherished treasure. Anal erotism becomes prohibited in the name of death and the stain of decay it casts on life. The genital is propagandized as the emblem of futurity and afforded a primacy to which the anal cavity takes its literal backseat. It is enough to make one forget that we came from animals that buried their young in the heat of rot, that had only one bottom pit, and which through an act of excessive retention, became us.

### *Braking out*

Before an egg hatches, at around eighteen days of incubation, the chick positions its beak under its right wing, pointing it toward the air cell in the egg. By the next day, the chick runs out of oxygen from the membrane, and has to break the cell, known as “internal piping.” The chick then develops an “egg tooth,” a sharp calcium bump atop its beak, and a “hatching muscle” at the back of its head. It begins to pip and chip the shell along a circular path. Once it makes a small hole it still spends up to two days chipping the circumference of the shell until it’s sufficiently weakened and bursts out.

Human infants, rather than breaking free, are pushed out with great effort. Caught in waves of contraction on one end and dilation on the other, we find ourselves shoved down the canal.

The Dutch anatomist Louis Bolk popularized the theory of fetalization, which considers the human to be an animal born prematurely. This prematurity is characterized by poor motor coordination, delay in teething, and incomplete development of the nervous system. The primary enfeeblement has consequences for the human’s psychological development. Our extraordinary dependency creates a kind of sadomasochistic blueprint for relations not just with the mother but with the infant’s own image which appears as whole and powerful in comparison to the baby’s physical frailty.

Bolk argues that primates took on the form of present-day humans, but only for short phases in their growth. Hominization then involved making these passing developmental moments into a stabilized character. While we typically imagine the evolution of the species as involving specialization, what Bolk proffers is evolution through de-differentiation. We progress through a double regression to our ancestors in their fetal moments. We evolved as a species by way of arrested development (executed via brake hormones).

Recapitulation theory retells the linear story of evolution at the level of the individual, positing that in utero we pass through the adult stages of other species (most conspicuously, we resemble fish in the womb). In contrast, the theory of neotenic man observes the retention of the juvenile characteristics of

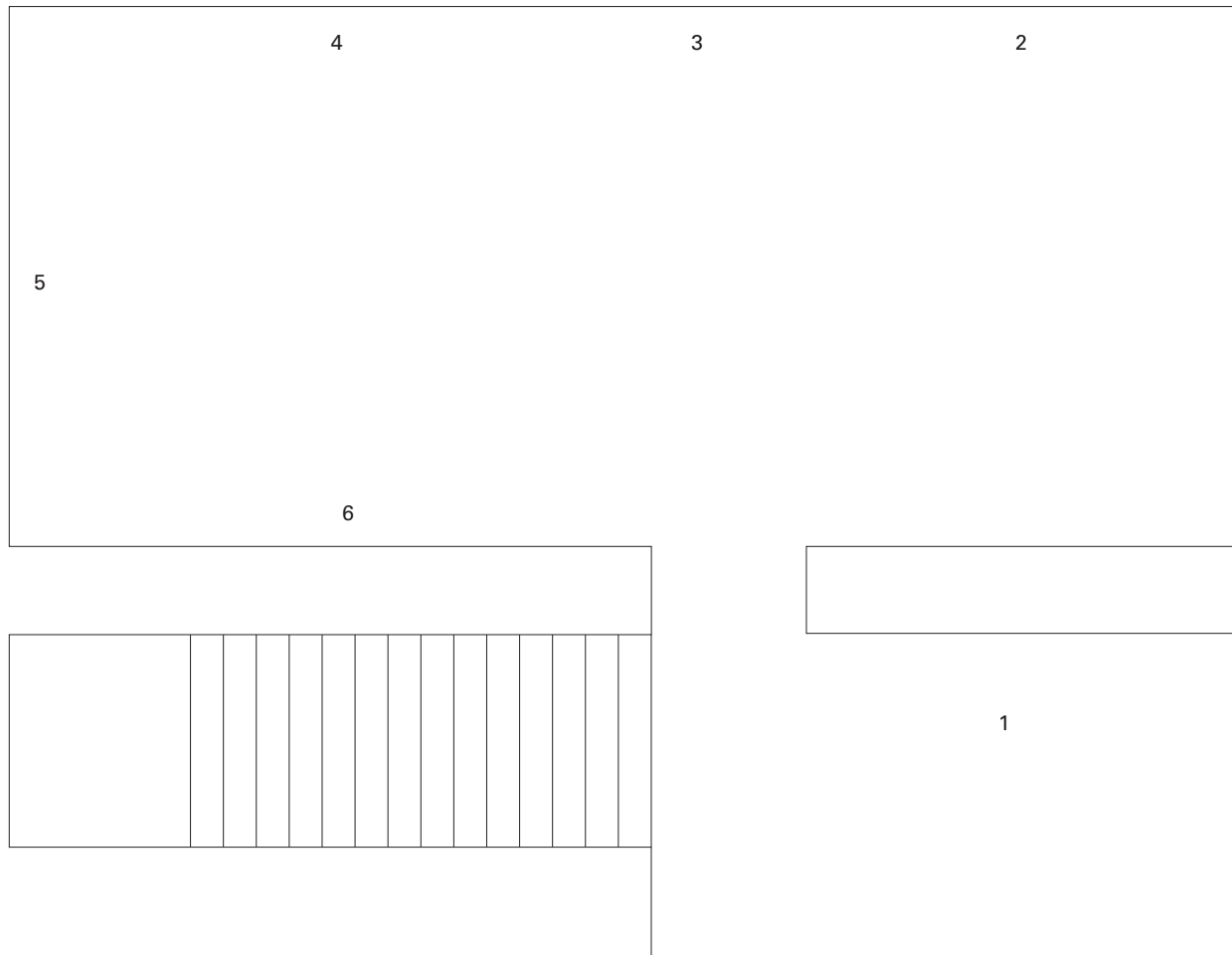
our ancestors physically and behaviorally. What characterizes the human then is profound delay—the suspension of eggs, the difficulty of birth, the slowness of growth, and the extension of childhood to the entire lifespan. Put otherwise, development is the record of our failure to develop. Immaturity is the condition which gives the species the very quality of being human.

*From the stork's beak*

When children want to know where they came from, they are famously told the mythic tale that they were brought here by a white stork. A linguistic cousin to “stark,” they’re named after their stiff posture. The German folklore that popularized the myth held that storks found babies in caves or marshes that contained “stork stones” and delivered them to human mothers in their beaks. In Greco–Roman mythology, storks were held up as models of filial devotion. They were believed to be animals that feed, transport, and care for the previous generation, death doulas for their predecessors. The Roman author, Claudius Aelian, writes that elder storks fly to an oceanic island where they are transformed into humans, as a reward for their piety to their parents.

So when children ask about their birth, what they get in part is an answer about their parents’ dependency. If the human is a form which categorically never reaches adulthood, all we have is the sexual theories of children—stories about the turn-taking of dependence and scientific fairy tales in which we multiply by way of division across landscapes, basins, and channels. These myths and theories are then nothing more or less than ways of recollecting our reproductive history, fantasies of genesis.

Cassandra Seltman



1. *Breathing bitch*  
video and sound  
8-second loop  
2023

2. *Chick*  
charcoal on paper  
16 ½ x 11 ¾ inches  
2024

3. *Chicks*  
charcoal on paper  
16 ½ x 11 ¾ inches  
2024

4. *Chick*  
charcoal on paper  
16 ½ x 23 ½ inches  
2024

5. *Chick*  
charcoal on paper  
16 ½ x 11 ¾ inches  
2024

6. *Chick*  
charcoal on paper  
16 ½ x 11 ¾ inches  
2024