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POSITION PIECE

Contemporary Mamactivist Artists: A Forum on Maternal Activist Art for the Studies in the Maternal Special Issue on The Everyday Maternal Practice: Activist Structures in Creative Work, Summer 2016

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This special forum for *Studies in the Maternal* asks fourteen activist-mother-artists, or "mamactivists", to respond to the following questions: (1) When and why did you start making activist/political work on the maternal? (2) What reception/reaction did you receive for the work? (3) What is the latest activist/political work you have made on the maternal? (4) What shifts do you see from this first work to this last work? and (5) Why is the maternal, in your opinion, important to activist, engaged, political art today? Responses highlight a range of geographic and cultural perspectives, as well as artistic strategies. One commonality between them is that they take the maternal not as a biological facticity, but a rich feminist site of political intervention.

Contemporary Art Mamactivists

In winter of 2016 I sent a call out to a group of artists that we could loosely define as *mamactivists*.¹ I asked these activist-mother-artists if they would be willing to respond to a set of questions for an edited section of this special issue of *Studies in the Maternal*, and asked them to please forward the request to any other artists they felt fit the call. The sampling is thus, to a certain degree, random. It has the specificity of having been generated, first and foremost, by my knowledge of artists working on and with the maternal, developed over the past six years of working as an artist, art historian, and curator on the topic.² It has also been configured by the specificity of chance encounter, as word of mouth spread and one artist sent another my way.

The fourteen artists gathered here represent a wide range of geographic locations (from Israel to the Netherlands), cultural backgrounds (from Muslim to Mennonite), and material approaches (from Performance to Printmaking). I included every submission, as the aim of this special forum is not to curate for a particular argument but to offer a sampling of the artistic voices and approaches that are at work under the banner of 'contemporary mamactivism'. That said, there are two limiting factors that should be mentioned. First, a number of artists whose work I might identify as 'mamactivist' chose not to have their voices included on the basis of either the 'mama' or the 'activist' part of the neologism. For some of these artists, a dis-identification with the term 'mama' arose from important activist work to 'de-gender' the issue by focussing on *parent* artists, not *mother* artists, and arose in such a way that they preferred not to participate in this forum; for others it was the term 'activist' that didn't feel quite right. A second issue to note, and this is one that many of my colleagues working in this field *will* identify with, is that, for many working mama-artist-academic-activists,

¹ A contraction of 'mama' and 'activist', 'mamactivist' is a term that has been circulating informally for the past five years (at least), amongst colleagues interested in the intersection between maternal and activist art. The neologism was coined, to the best of my knowledge, by US-based artist Svea Boyda-Vikander.

² See, for example the curatorial work *New Maternalisms*; the artistic work *Maternal Ecologies*, and the art historical essay "Maternal Mattering: The Performance and Politics of the Maternal in Contemporary Feminist Art" in Hilary Robinson and Maria-Elena Buszek's forthcoming *Blackwell Companion to Feminist Art History*.

their moment of 'awakening' emerged alongside their new status as maternal bodies.³ This means that not only are we witnessing increasing attention to contemporary art and the maternal in general, as this journal, this special issue, and the conference upon which it is based attest to,⁴ but many of those writing, making, and organizing in the field are actively straddling parental labour with young children alongside artistic, academic, and other professional labour – often with inadequate support. In other words: it is great that so much is happening; we are nonetheless finite creatures. There are at least two other similar volumes in the works right now, and a number of voices that accepted the invitation to speak in these pages are also contributing to those other volumes, while some who were invited felt already over-committed enough, and politely declined to add a second or third publication deadline to the same work-cycle.⁵ I share this 'backstory' specifically in order to highlight the explosion of interest in this topic at this historical moment, while at the same time highlighting the labour that goes into even a seemingly simple contribution such as this one. I thank all of the artists here for their time, their patience, and their commitment to activist maternal discourse. I also thank all of those *not* represented here for the same. This is a feminist moment. We are in solidarity.

My inspiration for what follows came from a M/E/A/N/I/N/G #12 Forum On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie that I read, and was impacted by, early on in my feminist art education. Founded in 1986 by Susan Bee and Mira Schor, M/E/A/N/I/N/G was a New York-based journal dedicated to contemporary art criticism that regularly hosted topical forums with the aim of gathering testimonials and presenting them,

³ I write about this in both the catalogue for the first *New Maternalisms* exhibition (2010) and in an essay, "Maternal Ecologies," published in *Performing Motherhood: Artistic, Activist, and Everyday Enactments*, edited by Amber E. Kinser, Kryn Freehling-Burton, and Terri Hawkes, and published by Demeter Press in 2014.

⁴ The special issue emerges from the conference *Motherhood and Creative Practice*, organized by Dr Elena Marchevska and Professor Valerie Walkerdine, May 2015.

⁵ These volumes include: Rachel Epp Buller's forthcoming edited volume, *Inappropriate Bodies*, with Demeter Press and the edited issue of *Performance Research*, Volume 22, Issue 4, "On The Maternal" by Lena Šimić and Emily Underwood-Lee.

largely unedited, for its readership to learn from.⁶ The questions asked in that 1992 M/E/A/N/I/N/G Forum were:

1. How has being a mother affected people's response or reaction to your artwork?
2. How has it affected your career?
3. Have you encountered discrimination from other artists, dealers, galleries, art schools, critics because of motherhood or pregnancy?
4. Did you postpone starting your career or stop working when your children were young?
5. How would you describe the differences in treatment of male artists with children or of women artists without children?
6. Did having children enhance your creativity or affect the direction of your work?

The responses Bee and Schor received were wide-ranging and included outrage at having been 'outed' as a mother in the New York art world of the 1990s – not surprising in an art world hostile to feminist, let alone maternal-feminist, bodies. Twenty-four years later, my questions reorient this inquiry from a general concern with the impact of motherhood on one's artistic production and reception toward the question of maternal activist art in particular:

1. When and why did you start making activist/political work on the maternal?
2. What reception/reaction did you receive for the work?
3. What is the latest activist/political work you have made on the maternal?
4. What shifts do you see from this first to this last?
5. Why is the maternal, in your opinion, important to activist, engaged, political art today?

⁶ The entire archive of the journal is available online, free, [here](#).

This shift in focus is a direct result of the visibility and recognized importance of the maternal in feminist art today. The maternal is no longer (simply) a condition that informs or disrupts an artistic practice and its success within a normative or alternative art market; the maternal is an ethics, a practice, and a politics that is urgently needed today.⁷

The responses that follow have only been lightly edited, in order to retain the individual writerly vocalicity of each artist.

* * *

Rachel Epp Buller (United States)

I started making activist/political work on the maternal around 2007. When my youngest child was two years old, I turned to making work around themes of maternal and familial identity and later moved toward ideas of how certain types of knowledge and traditions of making have been passed through generations of women. I did not at first view any of this as activist work but, at the same time in my art historical writing, I was seeking out artists, historical and contemporary, who had given voice to experiences of maternity and/or care work. For some reason, that art (apart from Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document*) had been notably lacking from my graduate studies in feminist art history. So, in both my making and my writing of the past 10 years, I have felt strongly that making visible and drawing attention to maternal experiences is a political act in and of itself. Women, particularly older women, have been overwhelmingly positive about this work, perhaps because many of them see something of their own experiences reflected in it. What sometimes surprises me is how difficult it seems to be to bring critical attention to experiences that are quite widespread: often, art around the maternal (both by me and by others) seems to be pigeon-holed as a private production – in other words, if one is making work related

⁷ The publication my colleague Sheena Wilson and I are developing from our recent colloquium *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene*, argues that it is the degree to which we are operating under the sign of the Anthropocene and its Others (the *Capitalocene*, etc), that makes matrixial ethics, practices, and interventions so urgently needed (see: Bracha Ettinger, 2004, on the neologism “matrixial”).

to the family it must surely be only about one's own family and not about any larger cultural issues that should be taken seriously.

My most recent, and on-going, work revolves around real and imagined family histories. While I continue to work in printmaking and book arts, I also incorporate other domestic traditions of making – sewing, paper-cutting, etc. – perhaps building on the work that some 1970s feminist artists did to bring 'low art' traditions into 'high art' realms (**Figures 1, 2, and 3**). At the same time, I am working more and more collaboratively – in art-making, brainstorming, writing, and teaching – and this, too, I see in many ways as an activist attitude, moving away solely from a focus on the individual. I am increasingly interested in the ways in which maternal perspectives might help us envision structural changes that could benefit all of us. So many maternal art activists in the last few years have moved toward culturally engaged work (sometimes deemed social practice), finding smart, interesting ways to generate social and political conversations and to offer entry points into collaborative work, that I feel optimistic about how those voices might help us tackle some of the major issues of our time.

*Rachel Epp Buller maintains a dual critical and creative practice as an art historian and printmaker / book artist. Much of her writing addresses intersections of art and the maternal, including her book, *Reconciling Art and Mothering* and a new in-progress project on *Inappropriate Bodies* (for Demeter Press). In her recent creative work, she investigates fictional narratives of imagined family histories and textural references to matrilineal traditions of fine handwork such as sewing, crochet, and delicate cut-paper work known as *Scherenschnitte*. She writes, curates, and lectures widely on the maternal body in contemporary art, and she privileges collaborative projects, both within the visual arts and across disciplines, as in her co-edited multidisciplinary volume of essays, *Mothering Mennonite*. Her most recent collaboration, with the directors of *Das Verborgene Museum in Berlin*, resulted in *Alice Lex-Nerlinger, 1893–1975: Fotomonteurin und Malerin / Photomontage Artist and Painter*, a dual-language book and the first-ever retrospective of the artist, on view April 14 – August 7, 2016 in*



Figure 1: Rachel Epp Buller, *Arbor 13*, 2015, monotype, 12 × 9 inches.

Berlin. She is a board member of the National Women's Caucus for Art (US), a Fulbright Scholar, a regional coordinator of The Feminist Art Project, and current Associate Professor of Visual Arts and Design at Bethel College (US).

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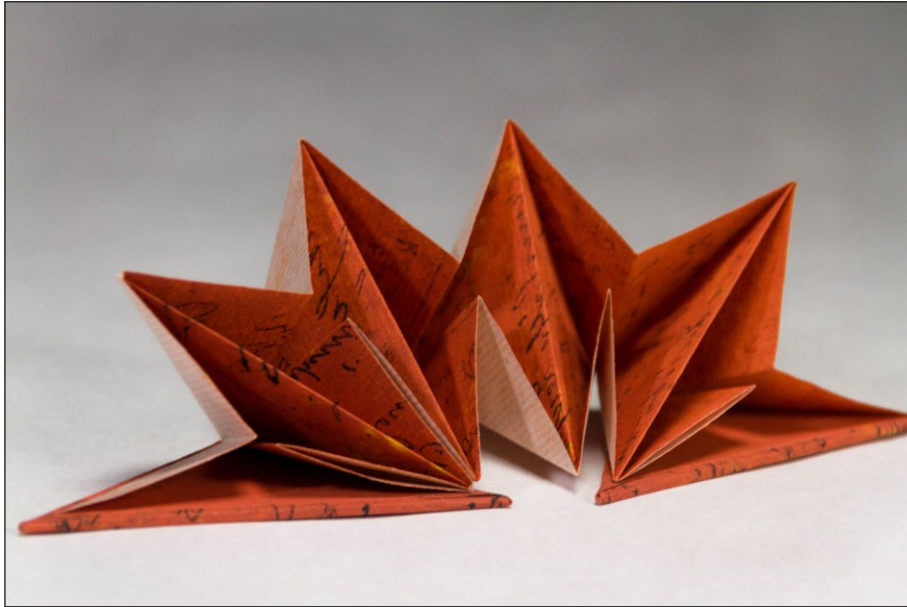


Figure 2: Rachel Epp Buller, *I want to transcribe lullabies from every language*, 2015, triangle book, approx. 2 × 3 inches closed.



Figure 3: Rachel Epp Buller, *Dear Julia*, 2016, tunnel book, 3.5 × 5 inches.

Deirdre Donoghue (Netherlands)

My maternal journey began some years before my journey as an artist. When my son was two and a half years old, I made my first artworks that touched on the maternal. However, my focus back then was more on the colonisation of and the history of childhood.

A key moment for my current practice was when my son was 12 and my daughter two and a half. This is when I made the performance piece *Kitchen Lecture: Notes on Gesture* (2009) (**Figure 4**). It was the first time in my career that I directly touched on the taboo of being an artist and a mother. Rather than separating the two different roles, I, for the first time in my career simply allowed them to collapse together in the work. Up to the making of this work, I had always felt the pressure to keep my mothering silent, invisible, secret even from 'professional' circles and the various discourses and knowledge production events within the arts. *Kitchen Lecture: Notes on Gesture* marked a cornerstone in my art practice and thinking about the relationship between the labor and politics of mothering and the labor and politics of making art. It was a kind of a birth into the political. Having worked as a mother, performer, writer, director and a visual artist within different northern European countries and



Figure 4: Deirdre Donoghue, *Kitchen Lecture: Notes on Gesture*, video performance 43' 26" (2009).

contexts where knowledge production and interdisciplinarity are embraced as key values within artistic production, whilst at the same time the visibility of maternal labor is shunned to various degrees, *Kitchen Lecture* was an artistic attempt to make maternal life and labor visible and to include it in the interdisciplinary discourses within the arts. After making this work there was no turning back for me.

The *Kitchen Lecture* has been shown in a variety of ways, often adapting its form to the specific exhibition situation. There is the original version, which is a video performance, but I have also performed it live and without my daughter and family around. It has been adapted to a book format, screened in a museum and performed and screened over a dinner in an artist made botanical garden. Perhaps because of the extent that I have re-considered and adapted the format for each public moment, and the publics to whom it has been shown to, I have mainly had positive responses from both women and men, mothers and fathers.

I would also like to consider here my work with the international *M/Other voices Foundation for Art, Research, Theory, Dialogue and Community Involvement*, which I found in 2014 as a continuation to my year long artistic research project: *The Maternal as an Attitude, Maternal Thinking and the Production of Time and Knowledge* (Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, NL) (**Figure 6**). The foundation functions as a porous platform belonging to mothers and others engaged in maternal work alongside their practices as scholars, artists, writers, curators, historians etc. interested in the maternal. One of the activities that I used the foundation for was producing *The Mothernists*, a conference and art exhibition in 2015. Another hugely important part of my political activism within 'the maternal' is my work as a doula, supporting and holding space for mothers-to-be in their journeys into motherhood (**Figure 5**). Although I find my work as a doula highly important and inspiring as a woman and as a mother, it was theory, or rather the *lack of* it on the subject of birth that brought me to train and start working as a doula alongside my practice as an artist, mother and a researcher. I am currently also working as a PhD researcher at *The Institute for Cultural Inquiry* (University of Utrecht) on maternal subjectivities, aesthetics, ethics and affect. Time will tell how all these different elements will begin to dance and resonate together.

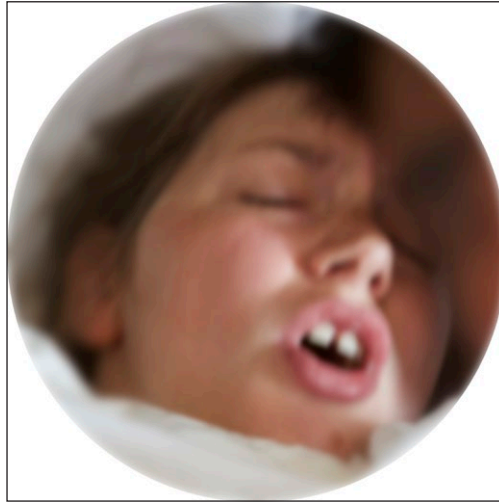


Figure 5: Deirdre Donoghue, *Lilly* (2015) / Note from the artists: this image represents my doula practice and is a picture of a woman in transition. It is used with permission.



Figure 6: Deirdre Donoghue, *The Maternal as an Attitude, Maternal Thinking and The Production of Time and Knowledge* (2013–2014). Note from the artist: This photograph is taken at the launch of the artistic research project *The Maternal as an Attitude, Maternal Thinking and The Production of Time and Knowledge* (2013–2014) initiated by Deirdre M. Donoghue and kindly supported by Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art. This first public event, which took form as a picnic com. workshop was a collaboration between Deirdre M. Donoghue, Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art (NL), the artist's initiative Oda Projesi from Istanbul (TR), Astrid Noack's Ateliers (DK) and a group of local mother artists and mother scholars living in Denmark.

The Kitchen Lecture was an artistic work with political undertones. The m/other voices foundation is both a political and an activist gesture. My work as a doula is both political, and activist. In broad lines I would say that the main shift here has been a move from a self-contained aesthetic form towards an activist and political aesthetic practice through a political awakening brought on by my maternal experience and encounters. Although the maternal as a subject and as a field is not my sole focus within my art practice, it has contributed to a sharpening of both my artistic and civic voice and an exploration of form.

As artists work with signification, coding and representation, their work can be seen as a site of resonance where signs, relations and narratives become revealed, (de-)constructed and (re-)produced. I believe that looking towards the maternal in relation to artistic practices and processes can unearth alternative social and political possibilities and models of being in the world. Artists and other cultural producers are actively embedding their practices more and more within the socio-political tapestries of world events and not only in subject matter, but also in their formal choices and aesthetics. Yet, despite these tendencies towards relational aesthetics and social engagement, art world structures are still dominantly organised in ways, that support the endlessly mobile, individual subject; the solitary genius, the flâneur who '... is always in full possession of his individuality. . . .'⁸ When art production dominantly stems from such singular subjectivities, there remains a gap between those who get to produce new knowledge and the kinds of knowledge that gets to be (re-)produced.

As long as we value art as important and valuable for effecting social change, and as a field of new knowledge production, no one should be excluded from opportunities to develop their thinking and voice through an artistic practice because they are engaged in caring labour. It is important to include, nurture, develop and cultivate maternal voices and vocabularies within a global context of current socio-political conditions brought about by capitalist, neoliberal free-market economy and its causal effects on ecologies of knowledge and care.

⁸ Victor Fournel, *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* (Paris: 1867), p. 270.

Deirdre M. Donoghue is a PhD Researcher at The Institute for Cultural Inquiry, University of Utrecht, where her research is on maternal subjectivities, aesthetics, ethics and affect. She is a mother of two, performance and visual artist, birth doula and founding director of the international M/Other Voices Foundation for Art, Research, Theory, Dialogue and Community Involvement (mothervoices.org). Co-organizer of The Mothernists – conference (2015) and founding member of ADA: Area for Art and Debate Rotterdam. Deirdre's artworks have been exhibited internationally, most recently at Haus van Kulturen der Welt, Berlin / Gaîte Lyrique, Paris / Malmö Kunsthall, Malmö / Museum of Motherhood, New York / Hoffmansgalleri, Reykjavik/ Astrid Noack's Ateliers, Copenhagen/ L40 Kunstverein, Berlin. Publications: Resonant Bodies, Voices, Memories (2009), Pick Up This Book, (2013) Our House in The Middle of The Street, (2010) and When The Landscape Begins to Map the Cartographer in P.A.I.R 2010; Chorografie (2010.) Upcoming publication: Inappropriate Bodies: Art, Design and Maternity, Demeter Press (2017).

* * *

Davina Drummond & Yara El-Sherbini (United Kingdom)

We both became mothers in 2011 and became increasingly aware of the lack of support for parent artists working within the arts sector. In 2015, we were selected for a British Council fellowship at Portland State University exploring Motherhood and the complex issues around sustaining a practice, and how artists, as well as organisations, can better support this. Our enquiry took three strands; social, educational and activist. The social strand takes the platform of a Facebook group as a tool to connect cross-continental mother social practice artists and art producers. It's a space to share opportunities, ideas, inspiration, and networks etc. The educational strand takes the form of lessons on the impact of motherhood on one's practice, both positive and challenging, for MFA art students, as a subtle intervention into mainstream art pedagogy (**Figures 7, 8, and 9**).



Figure 7: Davina Drummond & Yara El-Sherbini, *Take a Moment*. South London Gallery, 2013.



Figure 8: Davina Drummond, *The Mother Song*, Hayward Gallery, 2014.

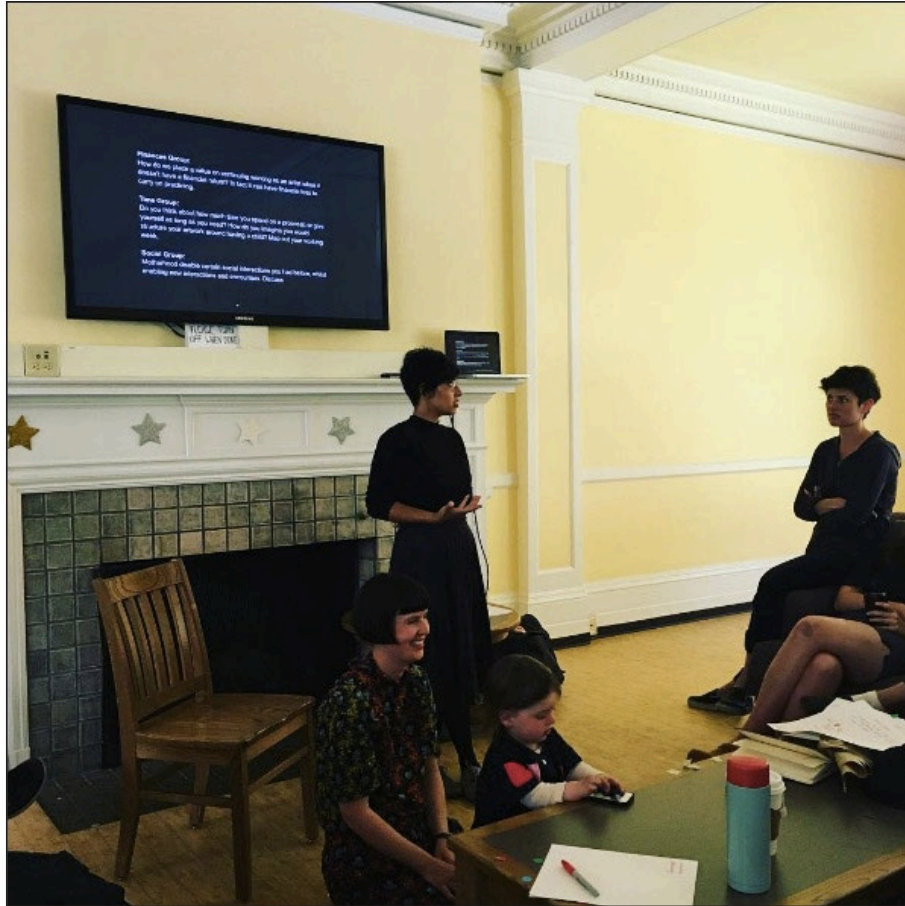


Figure 9: Davina Drummond & Yara El-Sherbini, *A Lesson on Motherhood*. A lecture on balancing motherhood and art at Portland State University, British Council Fellowship, 2016.

We are currently developing the activist strand: a makeshift Parent Artist Union, made up of artists, for artists, as a way to tackle the issue from within. The Union is devising a list of demands of how institutions can better support parent artists, and provide training and assessments for institutions to see how artist-parent-friendly they are. All three strands of this ongoing project demand direct participation with others. The Facebook group titled *Motherhood: A Social Practice* does not exist without group members, the lesson without students and the union without union members. We have experienced a high level of interest and genuine need for the project; our Facebook group grows everyday, we are planning lessons in new cities and people from across the globe are expressing interest in joining our union.

The Maternal is important to us because we believe it's such a significant, essential and powerful life experience. There are a lot of issues around the Maternal that expose the gender disparity in the wider world, and noticeably in the art world, where one would imagine it would be more liberal and egalitarian. Artists are the most underpaid/unpaid workers in the arts economy. Combine this with becoming a mother, which is likewise unpaid and undervalued, and you struggle to afford the time to make art/work. It's partly a consequence of there being no formal structure in place for when artists become parents, hence why we have such urgency about creating a union and putting those structures in place.

Davina Drummond & Yara El-Shenbini are currently 2016 British Council Fellows Exploring Motherhood: A Social Practice, and both have two girls. Davina studied at Goldsmiths and The Institute of Education. Yara holds an MA from the Slade, UCL, and a BA in Fine Art In Context. They have collaborated on shows/projects at the Hayward Gallery, and South London Gallery. They both also make work independently, and in 2016 have work at the British Museum, Great Ormond Street Hospital, The New Art Exchange – Nottingham, Gallery Oldham, Es Baluard Museum of Contemporary Arts, Spain, Musee Bargain, France and Quad, Derby. Previously they have shown work at the Venice Biennale, Southbank Centre, Tate Modern and Tate Britain, Victoria and Albert Museum, The Foundling Museum, Serpentine Gallery, Artichoke, Camden Council, Whitechapel Gallery, Arnolfini, BALTIC, IKON, Chisenhale Gallery, New Art Exchange, Modern Art Oxford, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, ZKM and the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, amongst others.

* * *

Farheen Haq (Canada)

My most recent work is explicitly about the psychological and physical spaces that mothers embody in their caregiving work. I have been thinking and living this work throughout my children's early years but it wasn't until 2015 when they were both

in school that I had the time/space/mind to reflect on the decade of mothering I had been engaged in. My visual art career began very politically and was about reclaiming representation and taking space as a Muslim woman. I'm interested in rendering visible the unseen – so now I am translating the invisible experience of mothers into my work.

My video installations are like monuments to mother-work, markers of the memories I have of how my body and mind lived while doing early-years caregiving (**Figures 11, 12**). Reception to the work was positive, personal and contemplative. My work is open-ended enough that viewers are able to weave their own stories and revisit their own memories that may be triggered by the work. My latest video is a collaboration with artist France Trepanier (Kanien'kéhaka [Mohawk] and Québécois), stemming from a memory of drinking my first cup of chai from my mother (**Figure 10**). In the video I pour chai into a bone china teacup that I inherited from my partner's British grandfather. In the pouring of chai into a teacup made of buffalo bones from the Plains, I consider my own complicity in colonization, how my ancestors were colonized and how the teacup, like my mother's body, gives of itself – the chai spilling over. The sacrifice of motherhood, the land, the indigenous



Figure 10: Farheen Haq, *Drinking from my mother's saucer*, digital video, 2016.



Figure 11: Farheen Haq, *Feast*, Wood table, projector, HD player, extension cord, 2015.



Figure 12: Farheen Haq, *The Table*, digital video, Video diptych, HD projector, HD player, 2015.

peoples we have displaced. The teacup becomes a stand-in for the personal and the collective body.

The shift for me has been in understanding myself in relationship. I have begun to unravel the threads of my own traumas as a woman/girl/Muslim/Canadian by examining my family history, my memory, but now I am keenly aware that my personal experience is not enough – all this has happened in the context of place. The

land is where all my stories take place and I can only best understand myself once I consider the stories that were here before me – I am speaking about indigenous histories that have traditionally been rendered invisible. By acknowledging the intersections of my history and present life with the history of the place I inhabit and the people of that land I understand my own experience in a deeper way. My practice is shifting into a place of conversation, collaboration and community.

The maternal is the source of all our creative work – it all begins with a mother, it is also the great equalizer. For too long we have left our personal lives at home and done our social/political work out in the world, but the home is our world, what happens there affects everything. How we are raised, mothered, bonded, not bonded, the invisible work of caregiving, these are the building-blocks of our societies – it just doesn't make sense to not examine the maternal – it pervades all.

Farheen Haq is a South Asian Canadian artist who lives and works on the Coast Salish territories of the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations in Victoria, British Columbia. She has exhibited her work in galleries and festivals throughout Canada and internationally including New York, Paris, Buenos Aires, Lahore, Hungary, and Romania. Recent exhibitions include Being Home at the Comox Valley Art Gallery (2015), Fashionality at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection (2012), Collected Resonance at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (2011), The Emperor's New Clothes at the Talwar Gallery, New York (2009), and Pulse Contemporary Art Fair, Miami (2008). Haq received her BA in International Development (1998) from the University of Toronto, her BEd (2000) from the University of Ottawa and her MFA in Visual Arts (2005) from York University. In 2014, Farheen was nominated for Canada's pre-eminent Sobey Art Award.

* * *

Jodie Hawkes (United Kingdom)

I think I had been trying to make a performance about my experience as a parent since the birth of my first child in 2009, but I felt like nobody would be interested. Becoming a parent forced me to engage in aspects of neoliberal capitalism – and the

status quo that it creates – in ways that before having children I could easily avoid. I found the overt gendering of children to be really frustrating – specifically the ‘*princessing*’ of my daughter by mainstream culture. But really, I think my work focuses more on the kinds of unfairness that are inherent within neoliberalism, and how, now as a parent I felt angered by a culture that doesn’t see neoliberalism and market driven capitalism as an ideology – but as an accepted norm.

But, still I didn’t really have an outlet for this frustration – until my second pregnancy, which coincided with the first pregnancy of Prince William and Kate Middleton. It was the NATIONAL-BABY-FEVER that surrounded the birth of the ‘Royal Baby’ that provided a really useful comparison for me, preparing for and thinking about my own baby, soon to be born. My son was born before the Royal Baby – Prince George – and when I started to think, as all parents must do, about the life my son could expect, in relation to the overwhelming privilege of the Royal Baby, I had a useful frame for my first performance project about the maternal. The work, *My Son & Heir* was really well received (**Figure 14**). It’s been performed at venues and festivals throughout the UK and also as part of a conference about Maternal Performance. You can always tell the audience members who have children. And those who don’t tend to reflect on their own childhoods and their relationship with their parents. But of course the political context of the project crosses that boundary. We have had a number of great reviews and will be showing the work again next month as part of a programme of work looking at alternative approaches to the family in London.

We’re also part of a group of artist/families called FAN (Family Activist Network). We spent a year writing letters to each other about our relationship as families to climate change. Last December, five of the families (including ours) travelled to Paris to join the Red Lines protest during COP21 – no small feat in relation to the ethical questions about taking our children on such a trip so soon after the Paris terrorist attacks...less than a month. We’re meeting up with the same families this weekend to start thinking about a performance response to our trip, a way of disseminating our experience more widely. We spoke about the Paris trip in a presentation last weekend as part of a festival in Bristol called *Mayfest*, at an artist-led event looking at how artists can still survive in the current climate.

The first piece *My Son & Heir* fits quite clearly within my existing artistic practice – I've been making live art duo performances for the last 10 years with my partner. The FAN project is a real departure in that we're working with a number of other artists and their children. FAN, also has a more overt activist agenda, asking how we can be families *and* activists – in relation to our shared concerns about the family and climate change. I think it's always important for women (regardless of motherhood) to have a voice, to be heard. And, I think the idea of the family (which is how I describe my work in this area, as it is always a collaboration with my partner and children) makes people perform in ways that are complicit with consumer capitalism – something that frustrates me. It's important for me to make art/performance that challenges these assumptions about the family and make the family perform in more political contexts, rather than just as consumers (**Figures 13, 15**). We are so often sold a certain (neoliberal capitalist) version of good-mothering. Bringing attention to this, my practice opens up new ways to think and feel about the maternal as an important mode of contemporary activism.



Figure 13: Jodie Hawkes, *Motherstuff*, digital photograph, 2015.



Figure 14: Jodie Hawkes, *My Son and Heir*, digital photograph, 2015.



Figure 15: Jodie Hawkes, *Family Portrait*, digital photograph, 2014.

Jodie Hawkes is one half of live art duo Search Party alongside artistic collaborator Pete Phillips. Search Party's work has playfully explored sport, the family and the relationship between people and places. Since 2005 Search Party has created performances for venues and festivals throughout the UK and internationally, including Culturegest (Lisbon, Portugal), The National Review of Live Art (Glasgow, UK), ANTIfestival (Kuopio, Finland), Plateux (Frankfurt, Germany), Nuit Blanche (Amiens, France), PAD (Mainz, Germany), InTacto (Vitoria de Gadiz, Spain) and Junction Arts Festival (Launceston, Australia). Search Party are members of Residence, an artist-led organisation based in Bristol, comprising of artists and companies who make theatre, performance and live art. Jodie is also a Senior Lecturer in Theatre at the University of Chichester and a member of FAN (Family Activist Network) a group of artist/families exploring the relationship between the family and climate change.

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Sarah Irvin (United States)

I first began activist work focusing on the maternal by calling for a change within myself. I had never envisioned myself as a mother, and I found no model for motherhood that I wanted to embody. I firmly believed that I could not reconcile my studio practice with the circumstances of having children. I began to ask myself what aspects of these circumstances were truly fixed and which were malleable.

I decided to adopt, as an axiom, the idea that the opposite was true; that there was work I could *only* make in the context of pregnancy and caring for a child. I immediately envisioned not only work I could create *because of* these circumstances, but myself *in* these circumstances for the first time. In that moment, new possible futures were enabled. Me as 'mother making artwork' had never made sense, but me as 'mother because of my work' did.

By considering actions of care as not only the subject of my work, but in fact the very thing that enabled my work, I was able to shift my viewpoint. I had devalued the experience of caretaking, and had assumed that my caretaking role would not

exist as an equal partnership with my husband. By challenging my assumptions, I acknowledged the value of caretaking and its right to be in the discourse of visual art. In spite of this, I could still identify the very real presence of the framework that previously caused me to reject the notion of motherhood. My mindset had been founded in assumptions of gender-based inequality and a social construct of motherhood that creates disadvantages for both women and men.

My artistic practice became a stage. On this stage my husband and I adopted the roles of 'father' and 'mother.' The work was every day. With the goal of equity in our caretaking roles, we each continually sought to liberate the other from any disparity. Our activism was small, room-sized, and one-on-one. He had zero days of paternity leave. I was in grad school. Our closest family members lived an 8-hour drive away. I wanted to breastfeed. Biology, economics, and culture all had their say in how we would care for our daughter. We responded with our own framework for parenting. In many areas the only option was to conform. In many instances, equality was not an option.

The work made in this time used actions and objects related to caretaking as mark-making tools (**Figure 16**). We made drawings with our rocking chair as we rocked and created transfer drawings with the nursery rug as we moved through the room in our typical routines (**Figure 18**). I made drawings while breastfeeding, attempting to transcribe my daughter's actions as she nursed (**Figure 17**). The list goes on. We journeyed farther into our own domestic space than I ever thought possible, and I constantly sought ways to capture the experience.

The boundaries between the domestic space and the public realm revealed themselves as porous and ever-shifting. I put the evidence on view. I displayed work that visualized the discipline of caretaking through our lived experience, wondering where we had control and where we did not. I carefully considered the impact of my presence and my work. I found it very important to have a thinking, working, obviously maternal body occupying public discourse.

By expressing the viewpoint of the maternal experience at the intersection of the social construct of motherhood with the lived experience of bearing and caring for



Figure 16: Sarah Irvin, *Rocking Chair Drawings*, Graphite on paper, 56 × 132 inches, 2014–2015.

a child, visual art can give insight into forces of inequality that have a global impact. There are tiny cracks in the walls that are built by inequality. My activism is small and subtle, but my hope is that it can infiltrate these walls in ways that other, bigger activism cannot.

Sarah Irvin creates autobiographical work investigating her perceptions of family members. The medium, format, and technique for each series are dictated by the character of her relationship to the family member and the narrative of how their lives interact. In her current work, she responds directly to the experience of caring for her infant daughter. Works include watercolours only created while the baby is sleeping and drawings created exclusively while breastfeeding. These works serve as a response to and record of her experience

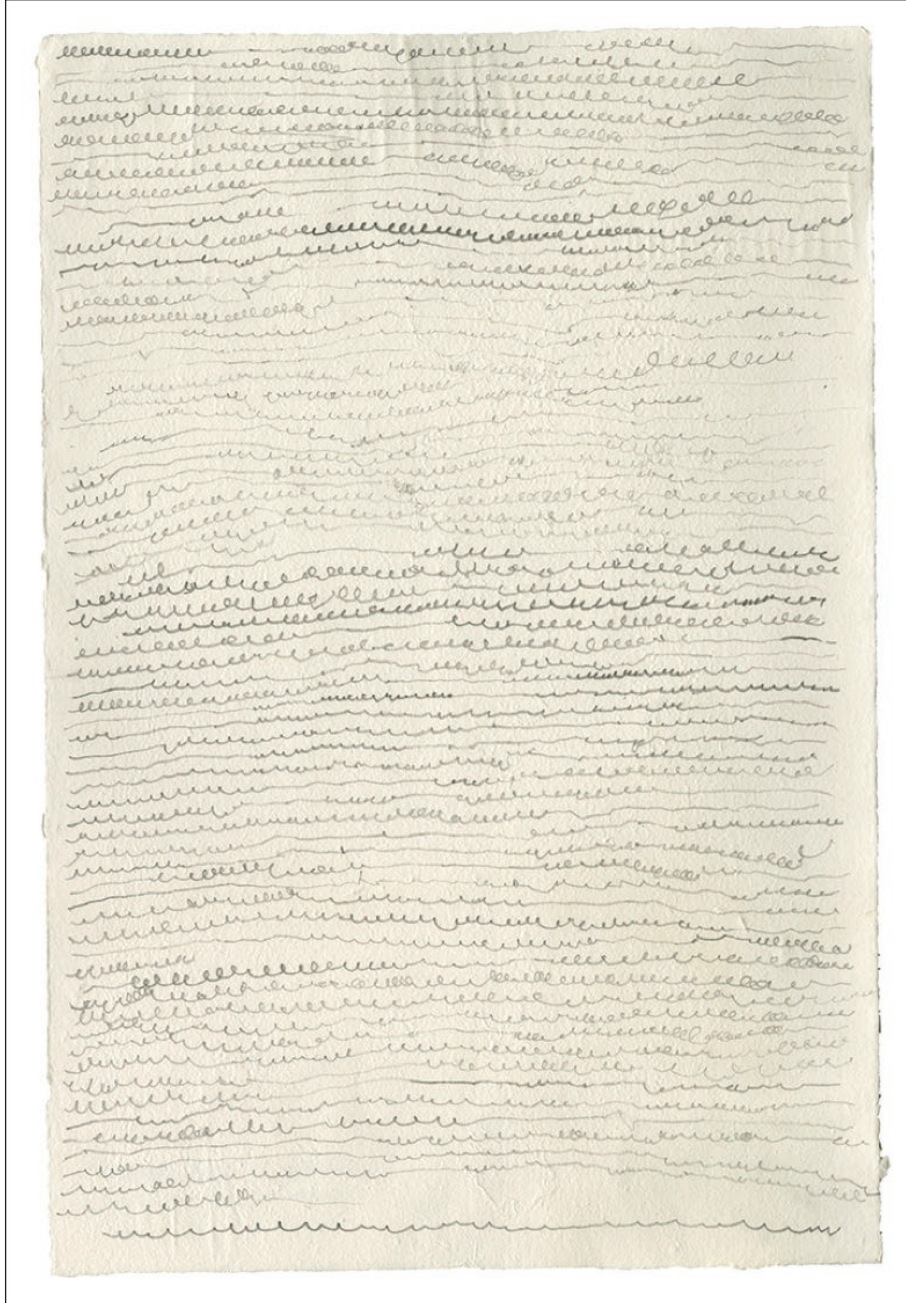


Figure 17: Sarah Irvin, *Selection from the Breastfeeding Series*, Graphite on paper handmade by the artist, 18 × 12 inches, October 16–16, 2014.



Figure 18: Sarah Irvin, *Carpet Transfer Series*, Carbon transfer on paper, 60 × 594 inches, 2014–2015.

as a parent and caregiver. In 2008, Irvin graduated with a BFA in painting and drawing from the University of Georgia. She received an MFA from George Mason University in 2016. Her work is in collections such as the Try-Me Urban Restoration Project and The Federal Reserve Bank.

* * *

Courtney Kessel (United States)

My work addresses the 'stuff' of maternity as subject matter.

The 'stuff' refers to the things lying around the house and that occupy one's mind that wouldn't otherwise be there if you didn't have a child.

As I look back through my works, one piece stands out as being the earliest maternal and that is *Il Nido* 2006. I made a huge 8' in diameter nest out of saplings, fabric and other things lying around my house. This was for the Brooklyn Waterfront

Artists Coalition Annual Outdoor Sculpture exhibition. At the time, I was no longer living in Brooklyn, but in Kentucky where I sourced the saplings. During the opening events, I invited participants to sit, lie, or hang out in the nest. My daughter Chloé was still breastfeeding when we delivered the sculpture to Dumbo. We had a really long day and she had not napped yet. At one point, I breastfed Chloé in the nest and she fell asleep. I laid her down and covered her up. There was quite a buzz about where the mother was and whether the ‘baby’ was part of the piece or not!!! That piece, in hindsight, was maternal, but formally, *In Balance With* (2009 – present) was the first piece in which I directly addressed the maternal (**Figures 19, 20**).

I was starting grad school as a single mother going through a slightly traumatic divorce at thirty-five. I was literally trying to balance my life. I asked myself why career and family couldn’t merge? They did in reality, so why not in the gallery, too? Throughout those grad school years, my practice incorporated more and more of the domestic, and the domestic became more a part of the gallery. The performance piece (now an annual event) *In Balance With* incorporates a number of items from home, culled and curated from the things that my daughter and I are currently working on or interested in. These items (books, toys, stuffed animals, food, laundry,

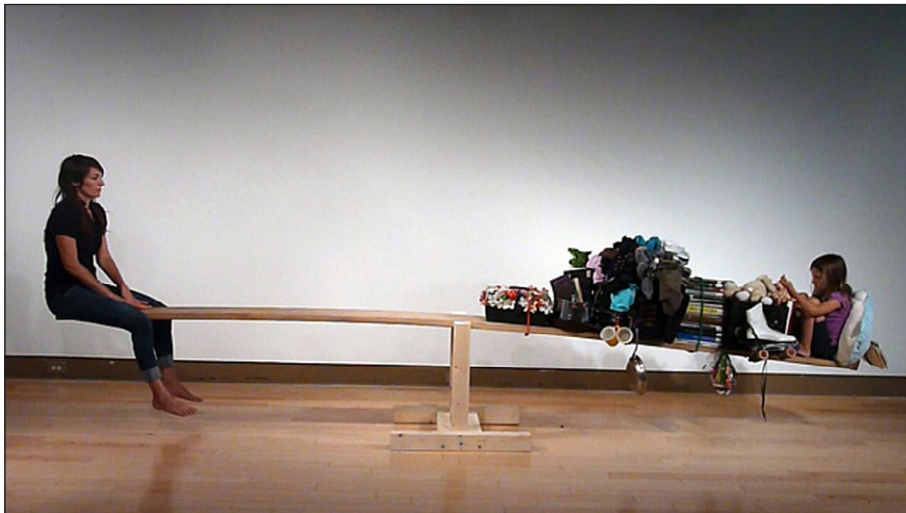


Figure 19: Courtney Kessel, *In Balance With*, performance, 30 – minutes, 2009 – ongoing.



Figure 20: Courtney Kessel, *In Balance With* (detail), performance, 30 – minutes, 2009 –ongoing.

bicycle, roller skates, soccer ball and shoes or any combination of these) are placed on her side of the seesaw. Each time something new is strapped on to the seesaw, I 'test' the balance. Once there is balance, I have to labor to maintain the balance until Chloé is ready to be finished. This represents the very literal fact that I cannot make my artwork unless she is content and occupied.

Thankfully, the work has been received really well. I think many different people in many walks of life, can relate. I've had mothers, fathers, grandfathers, come up to me after the performance, crying, telling me how beautiful and true the piece felt to their own experience.

I know there may be a day soon that my daughter no longer wants to participate in the performance and I'm okay with that. The piece is about my subjective negotiation of maternal labour. Through my experience, creative practice and continued research of maternity, I am interested in exploring ways in which we can address other issues through the maternal lens of ethical care for an 'other'.

My most current piece on the maternal is a series called *Without Chloé* (**Figure 21**). This is a photographic project in which I have taken portraits of my home and literally cut out anything that is *of Chloé, about Chloé, or by Chloé*. These photographs are fairly sculptural as they are framed in a shadow box that is hung about two inches from the wall. The shapes that are cut out project onto the wall on which the work is hung incorporating the exhibition space into the pieces, through shadow.

Apart from these works, I want to point to one in particular: *Maternal Verbs* (After Richard Serra), 2012. This piece is a direct reference to Richard Serra's *Verb List*. As a sculptor, I love this list of verbs that dictate how one would act upon a material. However, I see it as fairly masculinist, forcing one's action upon a material. Instead, I looked to my experience as a mother to collect verbs that happen 'within' a relationship, specifically that of a mother and daughter. As I was preparing this project for a two-person show at ROYGBIV in Columbus, Ohio, I told my mom about it and she proceeded to add almost 2/3 of the verbs!!! This made sense, as she has been a mother for two-thirds longer than myself. I mimicked the exact look of Serra's piece and put it in a frame. I still use the verbs in a variety of other projects because they speak to the maternal in myriad ways. I am particularly interested in putting the 'mother' in the



Figure 21: Courtney Kessel, *Without Chloé* Series (1–6), Hand cut digital photograph, 18 × 24 inches, 2016.

gallery. I think that is crucial to moving forward in Feminism. I think of it as a protest of sorts for the women of the second generation who were fighting for equality in the gallery. They had ‘choice’ between family and career, but, too often, could not claim their maternity as valid subject matter or as a specific subjective position from which to speak *as an artist* (there are notable exceptions to this, of course, but still. . .). My agenda is getting the maternal in the political space of the gallery to enlighten this positionality and claim its validity for myself and all self-identified mothers.

Courtney Kessel is a mother, artist, academic, and arts administrator living and working in Athens, Ohio. Kessel holds an MFA in Sculpture & Expanded Practices and a certificate in Women’s & Gender Studies (2012) from Ohio University, BFA in Sculpture from Tyler School of Art (1998). She studied at Temple University Rome, Italy from 1995–1996. She exhibits her work nationally and internationally including New Maternalisms, Chile at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Santiago Chile, FAMILY MATTERS: Living and Representing Today’s Family, Centre for Contemporary Culture Strozziina,

Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, Italy, the Tampa Museum of Art, Exit Art, New York, NY, and with the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition, NY. She has lectured on her work and research in both universities and museums internationally including the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, FL, Brigham Young University Art Museum, Provo, UT, The Mothernists conference, Rotterdam, Netherlands, and upcoming Mapping Maternal Ethics, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. Kessel is the Gallery Director for the Ohio University Art Galleries and teaches in the School of Art + Design at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.

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Helen Knowles (United Kingdom)

The first artwork I ever made about the maternal was a collaborative work which included running workshops with three generations of women and men to explore their perceptions of childbirth. The resulting work was three artist books. The three groups that I worked with were elderly men and women in respite care at Cherry Tree Hospital, children at St Anne's Primary school and teenage mothers at Salford Women's Centre. Together through mono-printing and storytelling we created responses to their experiences and perceptions of birth (**Figure 22**).

Some of the workshops were particularly shocking in that the experiences the women shared (especially those who had their children in hospitals between the 1920's and 1950's) were brutal. With the children, it was evident that they were completely non-plussed and frank about where babies came from. Some having even witnessed their mothers' Caesareans, others depicting fathers fainting and much blood and gore. There was also a lot of humour – a drawing of a mobile phone giving birth to another mobile phone and idealised images of mother and child. During the workshops with teenage mothers what became starkly obvious was the gap in language between the medical terminology and their own vernacular descriptions of the body. Vagina = flue (a Salfordian word for a chimney flue which can be seen in the industrial landscape all around the area) but familiarity with words like areola or even cervix were limited.



Figure 22: Helen Knowles, *Cocks Comb*, Screen Printed Artist Book made with Salford Women's Centre, 30 × 30 cm; Edition 1/1, Helen Knowles, 2008.

This work came from my own experiences of birth, having had an emergency Cesarean and then a home birth. I became interested in the politics and practice of birth and subsequently went on to explore this through curating an exhibition called *Birth Rites* which toured the Glasgow Science Centre and the Manchester Museum in 2008. I oversaw five collaborations between midwives, birth practitioners and obstetricians – all of which can be seen on the website *Birth Rites – Exploring the politics and practices of child birth*. I was trying to make sense of my own experiences through art. Several artist books and also wallpapers pieces, *Birth* and *Conception*, were created during this period. I was motivated to communicate to other women that it was important to consider birth, whether you have been through it or are still young and far away from the idea of pregnancy. I felt that our society had made imagery of this life process taboo and that in order for women to be empowered in the decision-making about their own births there needed to be an open discussion about the subject. It seemed obvious to me that artwork was the best way of opening up the discussion since it has an uncanny way of reaching people on a deep, subjective and visceral level.

My initial works were well received because I had purposefully played with decorative material, as well as using drawing and printing as a medium (which seems less confrontational than photography). I also felt that, to challenge people's perceptions, it was important to get round them with humour and beauty. However, on curating the exhibition at the Glasgow Science Centre and working with Hermione Wiltshire (a long time collaborator) who had appropriated an image from the famous radical midwife and activist, Ina May Gaskin (a photograph of a woman in ecstatic labour which she wanted to site in the entranceway to the exhibition), my views began to change. The GSC were adamant that they did not wish to exhibit this work in the entranceway and their reasoning was that it was inappropriate for children and generally shocking. In the words of one member of staff 'I would not show my niece that'. When asked what was deemed appropriate, I was told that they were happy to exhibit the drawings of a woman undergoing a forceps delivery. In essence, a woman having an ecstatic labour who appeared empowered in the process of birth was censored in favour of a fairly traumatic looking drawing of an assisted delivery. The Manchester Museum was different in their approach stating that they were happy to show the work even though it was next to the children's play area and they would wait for responses and deal with them if and when they happened.

There were no complaints.

Terese Crowning in Ecstatic Labour was then one of the founding works in the Birth Rites Collection which I set up in 2009 and curated at Salford University (**Figure 23**). It is a collection of contemporary art on the subject of birth. Initially, the university administration had problems with the work, wanting to censor it and keep it in a locked room until the midwives themselves took into their own hands and put it out on the corridor. These experiences taught me that it is institutions that seem to have the most problems with challenging work, constantly seeking to protect their public from what they believe may offend. Generally this hypothetical protectionism is founded on patriarchal views of women and the body.

In 2011/2012 I received an Arts Council England grant to make my most recent and probably last work on the maternal called *Youtube Portraits*. This work was the culmination of all my experiences, subjective and personal, and those which I gained



Figure 23: Installation view of *Terese Crowning in Ecstatic Childbirth* at Glasgow Science Centre by Hermione Wiltshire, 2008 (Birth Rites Collection).

through the years curating artwork and making work on childbirth. *Youtube Portraits* is a set of seven large-scale screen-prints, each one a portrait of a woman in the act of childbirth (**Figure 24**). The portraits are stills taken from video footage found by the artist on Youtube, part of a vast library of homebirth films posted online by the women whose birth experiences are recorded. The works featured in *Youtube Portraits* appropriate and re-present these women's filmed experiences and connect to a wider international concern with social media as a tool to democratise what can often be tightly controlled and censored experiences. Each print is created by exposing the screen with a digital projector, bestowing a pixelated quality to the image which directly references the digital origin of the source material. The virtual Youtube footage is now transferred into a physical object through the medium of print.

I guess the most obvious shift in my work has been to depict birth graphically through print and photography. My second artist book called *Ecstatic Birth Pamphlet*, seen on my website, was a precursor in some ways to the Youtube Series



Figure 24: Helen Knowles, A szülés természete (The Natural Way of Birth) <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CH0sRTYd17I>> Four colour screen print on Fabiano paper, 101cm x 148 cm ; Edition of 5, Helen Knowles, 2012.

since it appropriated images found on the net and pixellated them through the screen print process. Having recently read Hito Steryl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, I can see a concurrent strain of thought with regards to low-res images and high-res images and my need to take images which have a low-res quality and recreate them as crafted prints.

I guess the maternal is the most un-talked-about, the most undiscussed, and untrendy part of feminist thinking. Depicting the body became frowned upon during early feminism because some thought it played into the male gaze. However, I think it's useful not to try to win an argument by negating, or ignoring something. Our society (which views most things as spectacle) loses out in the form of embodied knowledge (for instance attending another woman's birth to know how birth is) but we have gained the possibility to see other births through video sharing. Obviously this will have some kind of effect which we are not yet sure of. However, the possibility to challenge the medical system, or any normative system through sharing

knowledge in this way, is empowering. There is so much heavy abjection around being a woman and this was perpetuated through much of the feminist writing of the 80's. As Fannie Sosa rightly states:

I create round spaces to exchange knowledge, gather strength and nurture people.... I resist the powers that want to break our circles, our sisterhood and our collective motherhood and authority. I author myself, and that is an act of resistance.⁹

Helen Knowles is an artist and curator of Birth Rites Collection and mother of two boys. She studied at Glasgow School of Art and is currently studying at Goldsmiths University on the MFA. She lives and works in Manchester and London. The performance of The Trial of Superdebt Hunterbot premiered at Southwark Crown Court, London (2016). Recent exhibitions include; 'Between the Lines', GRAD, London (2016), Goldsmiths Gallery, (2016) 'Procreate' Goldsmiths / Museum of Motherhood, (2015), COLLABORATE! Oriol Sycharth Galley Wrexham, (2015), The Withdrawing Room, Folkstone, (2014), Mokuhanga, To-kyo (2014), 'Private View : Public Birth', GV Art, London (2013), Women's Art Library, London (2013); Life is Beautiful', Galerie Deadfly, Berlin (2012); Digital Romantics, Dean Clough Gallery (2012) and Walls are Talking, Whitworth Art Gallery (2010). She carried out a residency in Moscow/Vishny Volochok with the Moscow Institute of Contemporary Art (2015) and Santa Fe Arts Institute, (2013). She is a recipient of awards from Arts Council England, Awards for All, Goldsmiths Innovation Fund, amongst others. Her work is held in public and private collections including, The Joan Flasch Artist Book Collection, Winchester Special Collections, The National Art Library, RCA and GSA Special Collections, The Whitworth Art Gallery, Tate Library and Archive, Museum of Motherhood, NY and Birth Rites Collection.

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⁹ ID magazine

Irene Lusztig (USA)

I don't think I understood my work on the maternal as activist/political work at first, so maybe there are two separate moments that I need to talk about to answer this question. I started making work on the maternal during my pregnancy in 2006. At first I didn't know I was 'making work' per se, but I was urgently trying to think through questions around pregnancy and childbirth that felt fraught and complex to me, and was having a hard time finding models for complex, critical, historically-grounded maternal thinking that would help me think through the things I was experiencing. There seemed to be a weird absence or evisceration of critical language and thinking – combined with an unwillingness to give voice to the kinds of ambivalent feelings I was having around the experience of pregnancy – in all the 'what to expect' style books I encountered in the mothering section of the bookstore or in my prenatal education class (where the word 'pain' was systematically erased and replaced with culturally-neutral words like 'intensity' and 'wave'). Even the conceptual framework of 'what to expect' seemed suspect and unhelpful to me as a starting point for a productive discussion of an experience that seemed to be

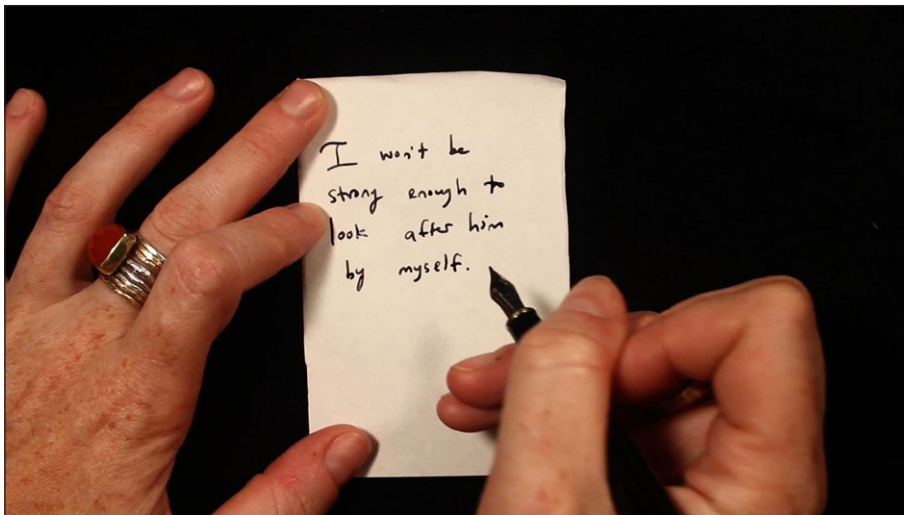


Figure 25: Irene Lusztig, *The Worry Box Project*, participatory web archive, 2011–ongoing.

all about the impossible or inadequate nature of our narratives of expectation. So during my pregnancy I started doing archival research for what eventually became my 2013 film *The Motherhood Archives* by buying discarded 16mm film prints of maternal education films on eBay, and my search for 'helpful' and non-ideological texts led me to read a number of medical histories of obstetrical anaesthesia (books that I immediately liked because they were the only texts about pregnancy I could find that didn't feel prescriptive or bossy to me and that eventually became part of the historical research for my film) (Figure 26). I also started recording my own startling, often-intense pregnancy anxiety dreams (of giving birth to rabbits, supermarket chickens, and giant pears), a practice that eventually expanded into my ongoing web-based participatory maternal anxiety archive *The Worry Box Project* (Figure 25). So what has become a body of creative work on the maternal that I have worked on over the past decade emerged out of a moment of necessity and absence – a process of teaching myself a critical and historical language for thinking about pregnancy



Figure 26: Irene Lusztig, *The Motherhood Archives*, single channel HD video, 2013.

and childbirth as I moved through it as well as a process of struggling to find spaces where it felt OK to talk about maternal ambivalence.

I don't think I fully began to understand my work as having an activist or more explicitly political dimension until after I completed *The Motherhood Archives* and tried to get the film screened – this is the moment when I began to fully understand all the systematic ways that work on the maternal is marginalized/excluded by the culture industries that I participate in. So, this is the second moment that feels formative of my current thinking on maternal work. More on that below.

When I started sending *The Motherhood Archives* to film festivals, I tried at first not to be paranoid that programmers might be sexist about a film about maternal bodies. But, as forty festival rejections in a row accrued over the course of a year – including rejections from festivals that had shown all my previous work – I couldn't help also noticing how many programmers seemed to be men (and how many films on the documentary festival circuit were about 'masculine' topics: wars, resource extraction, fishing boats, genocides. Some of these are films that I love, but still it is hard to ignore that there is a gender problem in the world of nonfiction film exhibition). A couple of times programmers who turned my film down said things to me like, 'this film is a niche film for an academic feminist audience and not interesting to a general public,' or, 'the film is well-made but the topic is only interesting to other mothers,' or the classic 'my wife would be so interested in that!'

The documentary film world – broadly speaking the genre space where I articulate my creative practice – has long been premised on a tradition of curiosity about experiences other than one's own. No one would ever suggest that a film about strip mining in South Africa would only be of interest to other South African strip miners, or that a film about industrial fishing is only relevant to fishermen. But during my year of rejections I learned that maternity is treated again and again as a kind of exceptional thematic space that could only possibly be interesting to its subject; or, more insulting, that mothers make work about themselves because their world has been narrowed so drastically by the experience of mothering that they're unable to think about more important questions – a deep irony when you consider that birth and death are maybe the only two truly universal topics that we all have some kind of relationship with.

At first I found this response depressing and discouraging, but eventually – and much more productively – I started feeling enraged. Anger led me to new forms of action, organizing, and network-creation. I created a research group on maternity and creative practice, curated a gallery show and co-organized a symposium on the campus where I teach. I've come to understand that part of my job as a maternal activist is to actively advocate for maternal art and to create new kinds of conversation spaces – in the academy and beyond – where maternal work – and, more broadly, feminist work – is taken seriously.

The project I am working on now, '*Yours in Sisterhood*,' is a performative, participatory documentary project based on archived letters written to the editor of Ms. Magazine between 1972–80 (**Figure 27**). To make the project I am traveling to many different parts of the US with a portable teleprompter and a camera. In the community where each 70s letter was originally written, I invite a stranger to perform a reading of the letter and to respond to their reading. My project invites participants



Figure 27: Irene Lusztig, Production still from *Yours in Sisterhood* single channel video and web archive (work in progress).

to engage affectively and empathetically with history and to listen deeply across time in order to consider the legacies of 70s women's movement today. While this new project is not explicitly maternal in subject matter, I think this work emerges directly from my maternal concerns with creating new spaces and networks of feminist conversation. It feels deeply connected to maternal ethics and maternal thinking, while at the same time it feels like a generative expansion of my previous work. In this new work I am thinking of maternal creative practice as a kind of ethics or form of engagement rather than an explicit or physical subject.

To do anything as activists we need robust, empathetic, inclusive, and feminist spaces of conversation.

Irene Lusztig is a US-based filmmaker, visual artist, archival researcher, and mother. Her film and video work mines old images and technologies for new meanings in order to reframe, recuperate, or reanimate forgotten and neglected histories. Often beginning with rigorous research in archives, her work brings historical materials into conversation with the present day, inviting viewers to explore historical spaces as a way of contemplating larger questions of politics, ideology, and the production of personal, collective, and national memories. Her debut feature film, Reconstruction (2001) was recognized with a Boston Society of Film Critics Discovery award and won best documentary at the New England Film Festival. She has explored issues around public feminism, language, and histories of women and women's bodies across many previous works, including the feature length archival film essay The Motherhood Archives (2013), the ongoing web-based Worry Box Project, Maternity Test (2014) and her newest work-in-progress, the performative documentary Yours in Sisterhood. Her work has been screened around the world, including at MoMA, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Anthology Film Archives, Pacific Film Archive, Flaherty NYC, IDFA Amsterdam, and on television. She has been awarded grants and fellowships from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, Massachusetts Cultural Council, LEF Foundation, New York State Council for the Arts, Sustainable Arts Foundation, Radcliffe Institute

for Advanced Study, Rydell Visual Arts Foundation, and the Fulbright Scholar Program. She teaches filmmaking at UC Santa Cruz where she is Associate Professor of Film and Digital Media.

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Paula McCloskey (UK)

I started making activist work on the maternal when I became a mother. However, I trace my journey towards activist work on the maternal to my early life. I was born in Ireland. My working class Irish family did not engage with politics or the arts. My teenage parents fled their small border-town to get married. My mum a protestant and my dad catholic, we moved to England when I was an infant but then moved to Northern Ireland when I was a teenager. These were formative years in my journey to activism as it was a time of immense violence and political unrest in Ireland. I was an Irish girl in a Northern Irish school, but I had an English accent. I learnt about Irish history and became enthralled with feminism from an early age. I then went to India at seventeen for four months to work with homeless children – when I came back I left home. On completing a law degree in the UK, I took a Masters in social work. I then worked for several years with the most deprived families and communities, supporting and helping, but also fighting for and with. I always had a strong sense of social justice and, quite simply, I wanted to make the world better. I worked with dozens of mothers; women mothering in the direst circumstances, most of them caught up in a system rife with mother-blaming. I chose my work carefully, trying to position myself in places that were open to challenging the system.

At twenty-five I became mother myself, in difficult circumstances. It was art that helped me to work-through my own maternal experience. I had what I would later term an art-encounter with the work of Louise Bourgeois. This art-encounter and its complex interaction with my early mothering (a maternal encounter, if you will) became the foundation for my PhD – a slow unravelling of the complex assemblage that constituted my subjectivity. As I started to write and draw about maternity and art I started to critically engage with my own life, as opposed to others. I am now a

practising artist and researcher with a particular interest in maternal subjectivity. I am also co-founder of the critical, activist art practice *A Place of their Own*, which was born out of my early social and political work with families and communities and my developing maternal art research. *A Place of their Own* is made up of myself, my partner Sam Vardy (architect, artist and researcher), and our four young children. It is a way to name an acknowledgement of the importance of the relations for us between living with and raising our children and the various kinds of political, theoretical, spatial and artistic activity that we are both engaged with. Some of the central questions that we ask ourselves are: how might the family be understood as a site of knowledge? What might the radical potential of the family be in relation to our interests (i.e. searching for post-capitalist productions of subjectivity)? What place do aesthetic practices or encounters have in subjective transformation? What are the ethics of engaging children in creative activist activities? What are our ethical responsibilities as parents having a large family?

Over the years, art, architecture, and academia collided with pregnancies, births, and the dishes so that resistance, creativity and everyday family life have become inseparable (**Figures 28, 29, and 30**). Part of our collective transformation is in making the connections to our ongoing research interests and activism to the everyday tasks and encounters of parenting. There is also a very pragmatic element, moving forward as a family allows us to continue to critically and creatively engage with and feel like we are doing something about social injustice and its causes. Contemplating the complex journey to what I do now, the intuitive and meandering way I got here has become part of how I see and present the work. Other people seem interested in and engaged with my work (both my art practice, research own and a place of their own). Over the years, there have been some wonderful responses where it has seemed to really chime with people.

Recent work has included a 'staged' twenty-four-hour draw at home. One drawing an hour for twenty-four hours: a form of hyper-drawing as part of an ongoing practice to explore maternal subjectivity by the practice of drawing. In child waking hours I was interrupted by my keen audience, with the sounds of cartoons, fighting,



Figure 28: Paula McCloskey *Boys on the fence*, digital photograph, 2011.



Figure 29: Paula McCloskey, *Borderlines*, digital photograph, 2011.



Figure 30: Paula McCloskey, *Becoming-Animal*, digital photograph, 2016.

laughing and the general 'hullabaloo' of everyday family life; art and family life happening together, at once. With *A Place of their Own* we are working on, as part of a series, a performance to explore the idea 'becoming-earth'. The series is a critical exploration of the idea of posthumanism in the context of what it means to be a family in the age of the Anthropocene, asking ourselves how we might re-imagine other subjectivities as we continually and collectively produce our own.

The work is constantly changing. This seems important. Experimenting with new activities, new ways of doing things, new concepts, new research, new technologies, new places, and people. It is integral to keep moving, keep having encounters and seeing what happens. Importantly, we are now at a point where resistance, creativity and everyday family life have become inseparable. I also have a better critical understanding of what I do and what we do as *A Place of their Own*. But it all still feels in its infancy. There's a lot I still want to do. All of it stems from becoming a mother, because becoming a mother changed me. Of course it did. Critically engaging with this change continues to be integral to what I do; from the shared sub-subjective encounter between myself and my unborn children, to the ongoing dynamic relation

with my children. There is much to be learnt from the Maternal as an experience, a concept, as a method and as a thinking apparatus. For me, the Maternal is integral to how we live as humans, not just with our children but in how we encounter others; how we live with and connect with other humans, non-humans, the earth and the cosmos. In sum, the Maternal remains at the heart of what I do; it is woven in the fabric of what I do so that the different threads of mothering, art, activism and research are intertwined as part of daily life.

Paula McCloskey is an artist and art researcher based in Sheffield, UK. She is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Mental Health, University of Nottingham, UK. Her practice and research includes explorations of the production of subjectivity, maternity, maternity and trauma, the family as a site of radical imagination, family-art-activism and posthumanism. As well as her own practice, she is co-founder (along with her partner and four children) of A Place of their Own a critical creative research and activist practice which uses mixed media (performance, photography, film, events). She has taught in various institutions and has spoken internationally about her work. Her publications include critical explorations of maternal subjectivity and art, art-as-encounter, and family-art-activism.

* * *

Iris Anna Regn (USA)

I started turning thoughts about parenting into work on Father's Day 2008 when I co-organized one of Fritz Haeg's Sundown Salons (The Young Ones) with visual artist Joyce Campbell. For the Salon, in collaboration with Tim Durfee, I made two objects that dealt with issues of scale and perception between child and adult. The work and the conversations about the work expanded and progressed when I cofounded *BROODWORK: Creative Practice and Family Life* with Rebecca Niederlander (**Figures 32, 33**). At the time my daughter was six, and by then I had talked enough with other parents to know that my intimate inner negotiations and processes around creativity were shared by a wider community.

Initially, I did not consider it activist work but did very much reflect on the universality of my very personal grappings between creative practice and parenting. I am always interested in increasing participants' agency in their lives through art and design, and the initial impetus for BROODWORK (2009–2016) was to name the unnamed community of creative parents and even to celebrate the role that parenting can have in the creative endeavour. I only realized later that this was indeed a kind of activism but in a form that I had not previously encountered. That it took a while to embrace the idea of activism.

I was also specifically interested in a broad definition of parenting because we live in a time where – although not entirely balanced – the traditional role of Mother can now more evenly be distributed amongst caregivers of any gender. I see this as a sign of progress in our society as we navigate continuously changing roles. And Rebecca and I knew very soon that the overarching rubric for this very personal work that came initially from our experiences as Mothers was actually even larger than parenting, hence the emphasis from the beginning on the word *Family*.

The reception for the work has been heartfelt and genuine. It is work borne fundamentally out of love and commonality and carries within it an inherent optimism. In the first curatorial installation for BROODWORK, artists and designers like Laura Owens and Edgar Bryant, and Linda Taalman and Alan Koch made work specifically for the show. In our second installation at Otis College of Art and Design, we had pieces made for us by Dave Mueller, So-Il, Health and Beauty – on almost no budget! When I created *Growth Table* with Tim Durfee the piece went viral internationally on the web. It's also been published in three books (**Figure 31**). It is quietly joyous and participants respond authentically to that portion of themselves.

The work around Family is part of a shared territory that touches many people closely. In particular, I think it speaks to my generation, that has grown up with a feminist education and is negotiating the growth of children and parents who are aging. This generation is also cognizant of the idea that mothering can be taught and that is as profound a cultural shift as any.

I feel like this work is most effective when it occupies different spheres – when it also exists outside, or next to, the world of art and design. For built work, I'm



Figure 31: Iris Anna Regn and Tim Durfee, *Growth Table*, Marine plywood, Douglas fir, glass, rubber, drawing supplies, 2009 (Photo by Jeremy Eichenbaum).



Figure 32: Iris Anna Regn with Otis Creative Action, *Made for Kids*, Asphalt Paint, 2015 (Photo by Allison Knight).

currently working on two scales, the domestic and the public. I continue to work on objects for living which instigate interaction between members of a “family”. I am also working on public artwork, a piece with BROODWORK for the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, and one with Tim Durfee for the Department of Cultural

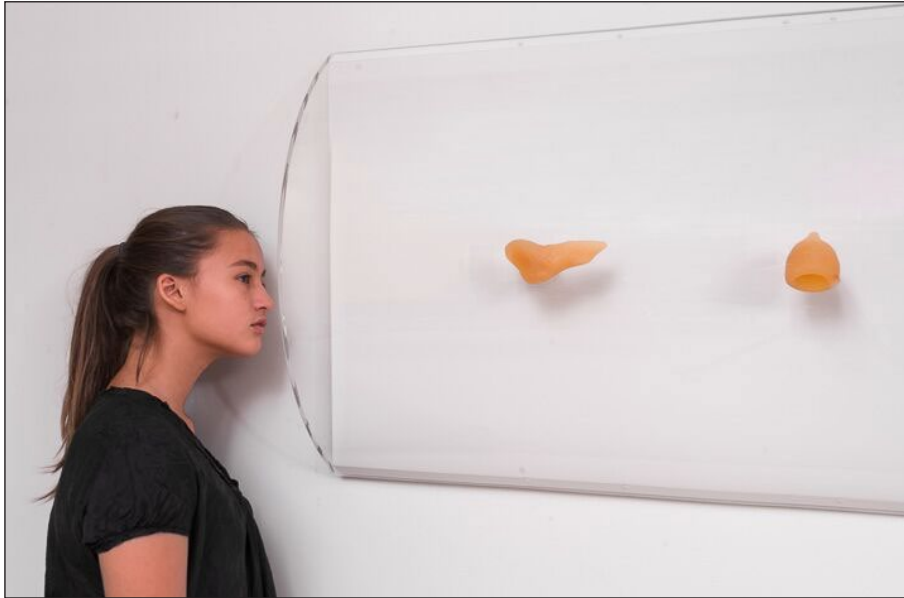


Figure 33: Iris Anna Regn and Rebecca Niederlander for Los Angeles County Arts Collection, Detail of installation *BROODWORK: Mending*, Cast urethane, stainless steel, acrylic, fiberglass, 2015 (Photo by Steve King).

Affairs in the Northeast Los Angeles Police Station. Both pieces consider how individuals comes together as a kind of family.

In 2014, I realized – perhaps because my daughter became a preteen – that teaching would be one of the strongest expressions of Family. I began teaching in the incredible Otis College of Art and Design’s Creative Action department in which I form interdisciplinary teams of students to work on varied projects in service to community partners (which are in my case an elementary school and an organization that deals with incarcerated youth). I set up my college juniors to consider their work on art and design projects while themselves being in the simultaneous role of children and parents, i.e., of students and mentors.

Lastly, I have work that I do specifically around my daughter’s life, where I intentionally model the power of art and design and community making. Over the last three years, I’ve created a yearly all-arts, all-school, all-family event at my daughter’s school, exhibiting work from pre-K through high school. We also have an interactive

silkscreen workshop with revisionist school logos created by a parent, a secondary student, and an elementary school student. For the design of silkscreens, flyers, and banners, I've curated in parents who are artists like Laura Purdy and Kim West. The art creates a non-verbal bond between generations and for some parents this is really the first time they will have made art with their children.

What has shifted fundamentally between the first and the latest projects is my perception as a creative practitioner of the roles of the Mother/Teacher/Mentor and the Child/Student/Apprentice. Through doing this work I have become very certain about the importance of being on both sides of the equation. I feel more confident about my work in this arena now and somewhat clearer about how to unfurl it. I'm trained as an architect and think a lot about scale, for example, not only how people are affected by the design of private space but also how they navigate the City. The progression from Child/Mother to Family/City is also one of scale. I think about how the smallest urban increment – like a sign – can affect an entire neighborhood.

I think that my initial bias against what I understood as activist and political was based on models of activism as anti-something versus pro-something. But just as teaching can be a kind of positive activism – and I use the term 'teaching' broadly – so too there are other huge opportunities outside of the usual structure of the art world that can be accessed through this lens. The Maternal offers a way of seeing, making, and activating that starts and ends with connection. We do not know where it is headed but it will lead to growth.

Iris Anna Regn is cofounder of art and design project BROODWORK: Creative Practice and Family Life. Regn is also a contributing writer for Herman Miller Lifework and faculty at Otis College of Art and Design, Creative Action. She has an interdisciplinary studio practice in downtown Los Angeles and holds a BA in French Literature from Smith College and an MArch from SCI-Arc.

* * *

Shira Richter (Israel)

The maternal state of mind has been a driving force and central research question guiding my work since before I became a mother. It started back in the 2000s (my thirties) with a seemingly unconnected incident— falling in love with a man. The fear of losing him, specifically to war, awakened me to the fact that I am deaf and dumb regarding ‘big picture’ politics that decide the nature of this world, specifically the ongoing violent conflict of the area I live in (Israel-Palestine). Where are the women’s and mother’s voices in this darn bloody conflict that is taking our loved ones? I started asking: why is it that women, who *grow people in their bodies*, whose time and energies are invested in safely raising human beings, remain silent? What person invests so much into something – a son, or daughter – to just give it away to war, no questions asked? In answer to these questions I created what became an award winning film, *Two States of Mind*, in which I follow two women activists, one Palestinian and one Israeli, on their quest for peace. No woman is a prophet in her own land, and most of the acclaim for my film and its message came from outside of Israel. A decade after I educated audiences at dozens of screenings in several countries about UN Resolution 1325, which is the essence of the film, it has become one of Israel’s women’s groups’ central issues. It is common knowledge that women and gender studies departments were created because of grassroots feminist activism. I like to think my work has helped prepare the grounds for both in my country.

Transforming into a real flesh-and-lots-of-blood mother of twin boys impacted my work considerably. Living in a country obsessed with demographics which idolizes having children and penalizes those who don’t, you’d think a mother’s path would be paved with gold. I was shocked to discover the opposite; the way the medical establishment, society, the law and my own family, treated new mothers. In response I developed a provocative art-photography text and video project *The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit* – one of the first artworks in Israel to expose postpartum mid-body skin texture as a topographic land (**Figures 34, 35, and 36**). Realizing the body-and-soul work of women-mothers is too often invisibilized, I made the invisible visibly *huge* (through large-format photographic prints). I wanted to expose the secrets



Figure 34: Shira Richter, *Sprouts* from the *Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit* series, C-prints, 120x180 centimeters, 2004.



Figure 35: Shira Richter, *Waterbed* from the *Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit* series, C-prints, 120x180 centimeters, 2004.



Figure 36: Shira Richter, the artist, standing with *The Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit* from the *Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit* series, C-prints, 120x180 centimeters, 2004.

and especially prices women mothers pay. Humans tend to value things and actions that have a high price tag. Motherhood seemed to have no price tag whatsoever.

I will never forget the reaction to my 2005 visual lecture at a national doctor and midwifery conference in Nazareth in which I lectured with this series of photographs. I was sure I would be preaching to the converted, so you can imagine my surprise when more than half of the audience – all practicing midwives – tried to delegitimize the postpartum experience I communicated via the works. ‘This is your experience, it’s not other women’s experiences’ they said. Luckily, there was one powerful midwife in the audience, Mindy Levy, who stood up for the angle I presented. Since then, a lot has changed. Knowledge has spread, both via my projects and others, but there is still so much to do. Postpartum depression is still mostly relegated to ‘genes’ and ‘the personal’ and psychiatric treatment, while most ignore the socio-political and economic context. In those years, political activism and art didn’t go together in Israel. Or better put, ‘political’ was relegated mostly to art/films

about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Today this project is considered ground-breaking by almost every gender studies department in Israel. While I have been supported critically, I have also been told (by a prominent gallerist) 'your art is good...why ruin it by mixing it with politics?' A chief museum photography curator told me 'it's not art' and another museum director said the work was too provocative for her museum, and in yet another memorable incident I was told by gay male cultural intellectuals with leading positions at University and Art departments that the subject of motherhood was 'passé' (this was around 2009). My favourite incident is the time my works were censored LIVE in a TV interview about an exhibition on postpartum depression (the footage can be seen here). 'You guys (TV broadcasters) screen awful bloody violence wall to wall and you can't deal with artistic photos of a postpartum body?' said Nurit Tal-Tenne, the curator, who was as shocked as I was that the works were censored.

Who *did* get it? They deserve mentioning: One curator whose doctorate is specifically about Mothers (Dr. Hadara Schefflan Katzav), another curator who was brave enough to exhibit *The Mother, Daughter, and Holy Spirit* at the municipal public gallery she managed (Varda Ginosar), motherhood researchers (a handful), a few enlightened midwives, and most audiences.

I feel the work of mothering holds the secret to a caring humanity. I feel this secret has been trampled and ignored and belittled and exhausted by our current practices, in almost every discipline. It is the most tragic missing piece in our world. It is obvious we have no idea what care really is, and how mothering encompasses the knowledge of accepting – and learning about – and developing with; a different 'other'. Body and soul. It may be idealistic but I think strong conscious mothers and mothering traits in everyone will create a healthier world.

Shira Richter is a multi-inter-disciplinary Israeli-American award winning feminist Artist Researcher, film maker, Visual Performance Lecturer, Curator, Writer and activist specializing in ARTiculating the socio-economic, gender specific and artistic politics of motherhood/care-work/unpaid labor, in large scale projects; Photography, Text, and Visual-Performance-Lecture. Her projects

*intentionally act as an interface, or 'multi-bridge' between academic knowledge, art, and contemporary activism. Award winning adventure film *Two States of Mind* investigates women's voices about war, Photography text and video-art exhibition *The Mother Daughter and Holy Spirit* exposes the secret prices involved in the transition into motherhood. Large scale light photography, text and video Installation *Invisible Invaluables* addresses the global value of unpaid care labor. Visual Performance Lecture/s *Hot Potato called Mama* exposes the cross – discipline value and erasure of mothers.*

* * *

Lena Šimić (Croatia/United Kingdom)

Being a mother throws me beyond myself, in relation to others, in relation to the world I am in.

I always try to begin by stating my position. That doesn't always go as well as I'd like. I state my position: I am a mother, I am an artist, I am a feminist, I am an activist. I state my position to you. I state my position to the invisible readers. I speak at academic conferences, at arts events. I put myself on the line. Here we go again.

There she goes again, another mother/artist. And feminist. Moreover, an activist. Well, which parent isn't, for their kids? All of them obnoxious parents who want the best for their spoilt kids. She is one of them, with the best kids ever. Well, she thinks so, anyhow. She probably breastfed them until they were five, she thinks she reinvented motherhood. She's one of them. Let's just wait and see how the kids rebel.

All art is political; it appears in the society we are in. It showcases socio-political structures: it conforms to the politics of today, it goes against them. Art makes itself visible in a certain context. It appears, it is perceived, it is allowed, it is welcomed, it is rejected, it makes itself clear, it takes place and time. Even when all art is political, all art is not necessarily open about its politics, its ideological position. I co-organize the *Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home*, an art activist initiative in my family home in Liverpool, UK. The Institute is anarchist and feminist. It is anti-capitalist. It is funded by 10 % of the family's income. As a family we dissent, we say

no to the injustices around us. We ally ourselves with social movement for ecological justice. We speak out (**Figures 37 and 39**).

I am keen to make the structures visible, the ones of the heteronormative nuclear family, the ones of the institutions I inhabit temporarily or on a longer term basis, the ones of the artworks I create, the ones of this writing. I am interested in the here/now. There's a proliferation of mother/artists these days – most of them in their late thirties/early forties, the ones who are able to speak, to be heard, to make themselves visible. I belong to this group. Here I am being interviewed. My voice matters in this context.

Once upon a time I used to attend two toddler groups, Lark Lane and Unitarian Church on Ullet Road, both in Liverpool, UK. I was a mother to two toddlers, aged one and three. Back in 2004 I made my first performance about being a mother – *Medea/Mothers' Clothes* – which juxtaposed archetypal anti-mother figure with contemporary mothers from these two toddler groups. I was on stage holding the juxtaposition. I was washing the clothes of the toddler groups' mothers in a small baby bath, I was making my position as a foreigner (Croatian living in Britain) clear through the ongoing recorded dialogue, I was using Medea's story as a provocation whilst trying to make sense of the maternal ambivalence that overwhelmed me.

I took the world of the two toddler groups into the city centre art gallery, the Bluecoat. Since my first performance in 2004, I performed this piece around the UK, in Croatia and Cuba. I revived the piece, as a mother of four boys now, in Bratislava Slovakia just last February (**Figure 38**). I remember a student in Scarborough standing up from the audience, thanking me for the piece, because it allowed her to think it is possible to be a mother and artist. She was pregnant. I got an email the other day from a student in Liverpool saying 'for years this artwork inspired me greatly which led me to do a feminist piece for my recent exam'. These responses matter to me as they are from a new generation of women performance makers who might become mothers one day. It is my hope they will enter the art world which is much less judgemental about mother/artists. It is my great desire that they will create their own artworks and autonomous collectives which don't rely on the recognition from



Figure 37: Lena Šimić, *Lena and James at Manifesto Slam*, The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, Liverpool, June 2015, Photo by Mark Loudon.



Figure 38: Lena Šimić, *Lena in Medea/Mothers' Clothes performance*, Studio 12, Bratislava, February 2016, Photo by Jakub Čajko.



Figure 39: Lena Šimić, *Lena and James at Time to Act Climate Protest, London 2015*, Photo by Gary Anderson.

hierarchical art world structures. And most of all, it is my deep belief that they will help reshape and change current socio-political structures and finally overthrow the system of neoliberalism, global free-market capitalism, which creates injustice, inequality and is damaging to the ecosystem we all depend on.

Being a mother throws me beyond myself, in relation to others, in relation to the world I am in.

*Lena Šimić is Senior Lecturer in Drama at Edge Hill University. A mother of four boys, performance practitioner, pedagogue and scholar. A co-organizer of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, an art activist initiative in her family home in Liverpool, UK. Lena has published four art-ist books *Maternal Matters and Other Sisters* (2009), *Blood & Soil: we were always meant to meet...* (2011), *Five 2008 – 2012* (2014) and *4 Boys [for Beuys]* (2016). She has presented her arts practice and research in a variety of academic journals (*Performance Research, Contemporary Theatre Review, n.paradoxa, RiDE, Feminist Review, Studies in the Maternal*) and in various arts venues and festivals in the UK and abroad. She is currently researching contemporary performance and the maternal.*

* * *

A very slight afterword

I have very little to add to the above responses other than to say what a privilege it has been to gather these thoughts together and share them with the readership of *Studies in the Maternal*. The above responses attest not only to the range of 'mamactivist' practice internationally, but both implicitly and explicitly to the fact that 'mamactivist art' is nothing new – one need only remember the founding of the collective *Mother Art*, early performances by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, or Lea Lublin's 1968 *Mon Fils* to be assured of this fact. Informed by the pioneering art-activist work of these foremothers, the artists represented here take the maternal not as a biological facticity, but a rich feminist site of political intervention, one that is attentive to the maternal "as an experience, a

concept, as a method and as a thinking apparatus" (McCloskey) that "unearths alternative social and political possibilities and models of being in the world" (Donogue). While this edited forum offers a rich set of such alternative possibilities, my hope is that it leaves the reader wanting more, and thus might be considered as a first step, a forerunner to a more in depth inquiry into mapping artistic approaches to the maternal today.

Natalie S. Loveless is a Canadian conceptual artist, curator, and assistant professor of contemporary art and theory in the History of Art, Design, and Visual Culture at the University of Alberta, where she specializes in feminist and performance art history, art as social practice and the pedagogical/dialogic turn, and artistic research methodologies (research-creation). Her dialogic and instruction-based wall-drawing installations, performance actions, and video works have been presented in festivals, galleries and artist-run centers in North America, South America, Europe and Asia. She has held research fellowships at the Center for the Humanities at Utrecht University and the Humanities Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine and is currently working on Maternal Ecologies (www.maternalecologies.ca), a research-creation project funded by an Insight Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada), a book on Art and/as Research for Duke UP, and a chapter on feminist art and the maternal for the forthcoming Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Feminist Art Practice and Theory. Natalie directs the Research-Creation and Social Justice CoLABoratory at the University of Alberta.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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