

MATERNALISMS:REDUX



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■ Edited by Natalie Loveless

DEPARTMENT OF ART & DESIGN | UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

MATERNALISMS:REDUX

■ **New Maternalisms: Redux**

Curated by Natalie Loveless

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NEW MATERNALISMS: REDUX
A CRITICAL **CURATORIAL REFLECTION**

Natalie Loveless on the exhibition



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A CRITICAL CURATORIAL REFLECTION

Natalie Loveless on the exhibition

When I coined the neologism *New Maternalisms* back in 2012, it was quite simply as a contraction bringing the terms of the maternal together with that world of thought that has, over the past decade or so, been gathering together in the name of feminist new materialism.¹ My hope was to help name a new generation of artists for whom concerns with individual maternal labour and political systems of support are brought together with broader accounts of what Karen Barad, from a feminist new materialist perspective, has called “intra-action.”² In the catalogue essay for the very first *New Maternalisms* exhibition (2012), I suggested that new materialism, as a feminist theoretical approach, might offer those of us working at the intersections of art practice, theory, and history some traction when grappling with the complexities of the maternal *in* and *as* art in the first few decades of the 21st century. There was also another, more personal, starting point for the exhibition series. As I have written elsewhere, my interest in this way of thinking about contemporary feminist art and the maternal emerged from my experience of the first year of my son’s life, mediated through an artistic research project called *Maternal Ecologies*.³ I developed this three-year daily practice performance project to explore the intensity of the early years of maternal affect and labour as a professional artist-academic, combining the particular attunement of a body-based performance artist with a feminist engagement in the political implications of the personal. Informed by these — my experiences of early motherhood and my reading in feminist new materialism — I began to reflect on the maternal as a political and ethical orientation, one that invites us to think with responsive care networks and with the urgency, interruption, and responsivity of those early maternal years. As a result, alongside my own artistic daily-practice project, I started to curate exhibitions that brought together artists whose work seemed to fit into this mandate, with a focus on artists living and working in North America (Herrera Silva was based in LA until 2015, and was responsible for instigating my co-curation, with Soledad Novoa Donoso, of the second exhibition, *New Maternalisms Chile*, 2014). For *New Maternalisms: Redux* (2016), the final exhibition in the series, I invited five artists who had been featured in the earlier exhibitions to showcase earlier work and produce something



new. While there are many directions I could have gone for this final exhibition, in the end I chose five artists with sustained, iterative, multi-year practices — Lenka Clayton, Jess Dobkin, Alejandra Herrera, Courtney Kessel, and Jill Miller — and I invited leading and emerging voices in the field to write critical essays responding to the works: Irina Aristarkhova, Rachel Epp Buller, Deirdre Donoghue, Jennie Klein, and Andrea Liss. This volume collects those essays, one about each artist, written by these prominent voices in the field. Each author approaches the exhibition as well each artist’s *oeuvre* in their own way, offering critical commentary on their work as well as, in some instances, the project as a whole.

THE WORKS

▲ **Courtney Kessel** is a US-based artist who works with durational performance, placing both her own and her child’s body into the gallery or museum space as art. For the iterative series *In Balance With*, Kessel



gathers together the objects of her and her daughter's everyday life into a gallery space in which she has built a raw wooden see-saw. *In Balance With* grows and changes with the child, each iteration featuring different objects as colouring books give way to iPads, or scooters to bicycles. When the work travels, references to mobility and portability appear: a yoga mat or running shoes, a suitcase, or borrowed items signifying the shared experience of mothering away from home.

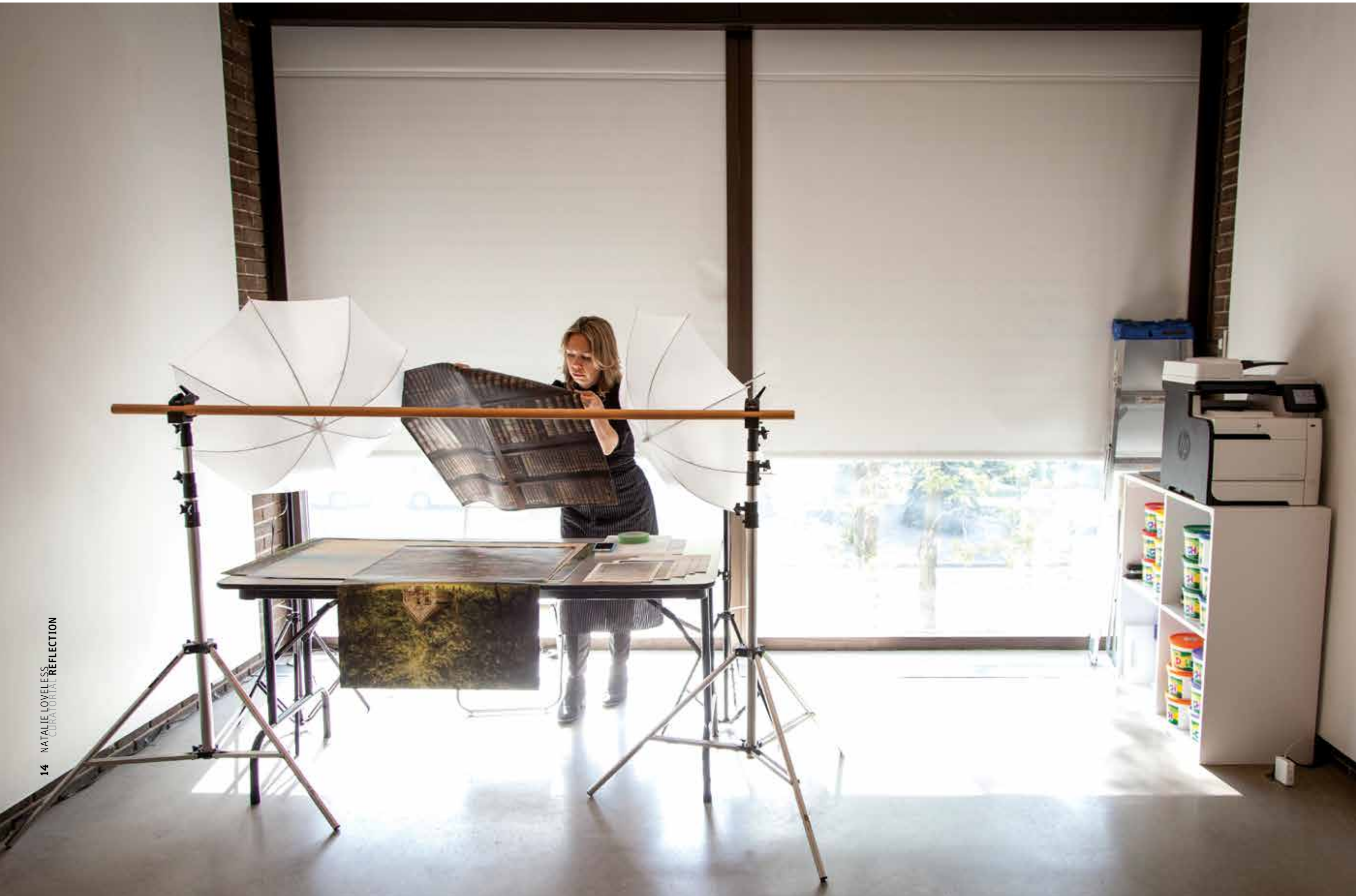
In Balance With emerged from Kessel's need, as a single working mother, to have her daughter in the studio with her in order to be able to make work at all. As in many of her other works, Kessel here uses collaboration and items imbued with domesticity to highlight hidden or neglected relations in artistic, academic, and domestic contexts. Changes between iterations are apparent and reference the dynamic nature of this work — a performative, collaborative self-portrait, rendered with contemporary objects and actions that replace the romantic capture of the maternal dyad with ongoing struggle, as balance is attempted, failing more often than succeeding, and as both parties — mother and child — actively negotiate the work. As Deirdre Donoghue explains in her essay, Kessel's two other works featured in *New Maternalisms: Redux*, a video triptych *Sharing Space* and the photographic series *Without Chloé*, both support the performance piece. The video series, in which Clevenger repeatedly gets into her mother's clothing while Kessel is wearing it, plays with the absurd intimacy of mothering; the photographs, on the other hand, in which Kessel has removed all elements that represent her child from her daily living space, remind the viewer of the anticipation of loss that so often accompanies the parenting of an older child. *In Balance With* was featured in *New Maternalisms Chile* as well as *New Maternalisms: Redux*. *Without Chloé* was developed specifically for *New Maternalisms: Redux*, and *Sharing Space* was shown here as a triptych for the first time.

► **Jill Miller** is a US artist who has been working with maternal themes since 2011, when she developed *The Milk Truck*. Commissioned by the Andy Warhol Museum for the 2011 Pittsburgh Biennial, *The Milk Truck* was a mobile breastfeeding unit designed in response to the

unfriendly environment toward nursing mothers in Pittsburgh, PA. Although Pennsylvania mothers were technically protected by the 2007 Freedom to Breastfeed Act, mothers who breastfed in public were frequently harassed, as Miller quickly discovered when she moved there. Staffed by volunteer parents, *The Milk Truck* would be dispatched when a woman contacted the truck staff — via call, text, or tweet — after being hassled for nursing in public. The truck reached out to the community while *en route* to the woman's location and then held an impromptu nursing party in front of the offending establishment. This work was featured in the first *New Maternalisms* in 2012, when Miller drove the truck from Pittsburgh to Toronto and parked it in front of the gallery for the duration of the exhibition.

Miller similarly brings visibility to the hidden labour of mothering in her 2013 *Extreme Mothering!*, a video that uses GoPro technology to play with GoPro ideology. GoPro marketing promises to make “everyone a hero,” but their promo videos generally feature only extreme sports figures helicoptering to mountain tops for snowboarding or performing





other bizarre, life-threatening stunts. Using proprietary GoPro editing software designed to create “extreme” videos from any footage, Jill Miller splices her domestic recordings of lunch-making and toilet-training into a frenetic series of GoPro marketing videos. The fast-paced editing combined with the anxiety-building soundtrack results in a humorous collage of iconic masculine heroes in parallel with the ultimate unsung hero—the mother. This work is a part of the *Homeschooled* series, a body of work the artist completed with her eldest son while he was being homeschooled for six months, and was featured in *New Maternalisms Chile*.

Both of these works were included in *New Maternalisms: Redux* (*The Milk Truck* as documentation and *Extreme Mothering!* as a single-channel video piece) along with a new work, *24 Hour Family Portraits*. *24 Hour Family Portraits* offered snapshots of a family’s domestic soundscape. For one day, participants were asked to keep a log of the acoustic events—joyful, angry, romantic, and so on—in their family atmosphere: squeaks, yawps, bellows, and bawls, and any significant auditory event in between. Miller then created a snapshot of the family informed by their self-reported phonic events over a 24-hour period. No photographs or other visual cues were used to determine the portrait, only the tallies of each person’s contribution to the family soundscape. The artist then consulted the shouting log to assign each family member a color, representing each individual as a series of spheres depicting that person’s audible outbursts. Louder and longer shouts resulted in large balls, while minor exclamations were represented by smaller balls. For *New Maternalisms: Redux*, Miller created 50 portraits of local and international families onsite and throughout the duration of the exhibition. As Rachel Epp Buller points out in her essay, Miller’s work recodes the very texture of everyday familial life according to new ecological attunements; a day of noise logged for the project, after all, is very different from a day of noise that is not being reflected on and recoded as art.

► **Jess Dobkin** is a Canadian artist whose work ranges from hyperbolic queer cabaret to interventionist social practice. Uniting research, documentation, and public performance action, her performance piece

The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar invites participants to sample small quantities of pasteurized human breast milk in a dialogic setting. Dobkin first performed *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* in 2006 when her daughter was one year old. She initially envisioned that she would be one of the donors at that first performance, but she had insurmountable trouble breastfeeding and eventually had to give up. The performance thus became an unexpected opportunity for the artist to “come out” publicly about her failure to breastfeed. Dobkin writes: “I invite you to participate in a transgression of sorts, and to embrace curiosity as a starting place for a meaningful and mature exchange about complex issues. Everyone is welcome to engage in the performance—as it discusses not just breastfeeding, but also issues of intimacy, sexuality, our mortality, bodies and biology, taste, intimacy and risk” (wall text for *Lactation Station*).

As detailed in Irina Aristarkhova’s essay, five women in Edmonton donated milk for *The Lactation Station*’s third iteration in *New Maternalisms: Redux*. Dobkin conducted interviews in advance of the







exhibition with each donor, gathering stories and information for use in her public presentation. During these videotaped interviews Dobkin posed detailed questions about their lifestyle, their diet, and their breastfeeding, birthing, and motherhood experiences. The interviews were left open-ended to encourage the sharing of anecdotes that might then foster a sense of intimacy between drinkers and donors, and were edited for a video that played in the space throughout the tastings and the run of the exhibition. Using sensory taste to initiate a conversation about *cultural* taste and taboo, *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* aims to bring the experiences of new mothers into the public arena, and to open up discussion of a complex human experience that, among other such experiences, is difficult to articulate and often systemically distorted and undervalued.

▲ **Alejandra Herrera Silva** is a dual Chilean-us national who has produced more than fifteen durational, action-based performances on the

maternal since 2007. In these performances, Herrera Silva materializes maternal affects and labour by working with milk and red wine, glass in various forms (cups, jars, bowls) etched with words or inscribed with red vinyl lettering, ceramic plates and bowls, Plexiglass cubes, white clothing embroidered with text that only becomes visible as red wine pours over the cloth, nudity, and audience participation. The longest of these performances was ten hours (*Lineage*, in collaboration with Mariel Carranza, Los Angeles, California, 2007) and the shortest, thirty minutes (*Amor de madre, Love II*, Interjack, Bielsko-Biala, Poland, 2009). For each of the *New Maternalisms* exhibitions, Herrera Silva developed a new 90-minute work, working with a similar set of objects and actions. In each, Herrera paces, screams, breaks a stack of forty or so white plates and bowls with her high-heeled feet, holds roughly thirty wine glasses on trays in each of her hands until she can't hold them any longer and they fall to the floor, and walks around barefoot sweeping up the mess. During the first *New Maternalisms* performance, *Woman's Challenge*, Herrera Silva yelled "mama mama mama" with such intensity that the spectre of her three children demanding every moment of her attention overwhelmed the room. At one point during the performance for *New Maternalisms Chile, Historia de la Resistencia*, she paced back and forth, carrying a very heavy plate of glass with the words "women delay motherhood for their professional careers" on it in red lettering. Hauling it along with her through an absurd relay of activities, she ended up wet, spattered, exhausted, the plate propped between her legs as she raised a glass to the audience in front of a tableau that included a small screen with underwater images of her daughters jumping into a swimming pool on a loop. *Historia de la Resistencia* was Herrera Silva's first performance of this series in her hometown, Santiago, and the first one in which her own mother participated. In Edmonton, for *Testing the Waters*, Herrera cycled through many similar actions, with one key difference: to end the performance she threw rocks at a mountain of dishware held in place by safety glass until it broke, the dishes flowing like a wave from the corner of the room with a cacophony that instilled fear in many and delight in others. As Jennie Klein argues below, taken as a whole, Herrera Silva's durational, action-based performances invite us to experience the ambivalent,



glorious complexities of inhabiting a maternal identity shaped by a specific national inheritance; she offers us actions that speak to the surrender, creativity, patience, rage, banality, and repetition of maternal labour as an act of extreme endurance.

► **Lenka Clayton** is a US-based, UK-born interdisciplinary artist whose work – with collaborator Jon Rubin – was recently commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum as part of their new Social Practice Art Initiative. Clayton's first maternal artwork was the 2011 *Maternity Leave*. The work (as art historian Andrea Liss describes in the essay that follows) challenges the autonomy of the “white cube” by placing a white plastic baby monitor on a plinth linked via Skype to her son’s crib at home. Over the course of the biennial, the baby monitor emitted the babble, cries, and distant domestic audio world of the newborn’s room, filtering this into the space of the museum while the museum publicly paid the artist the equivalent of a UK “Maternity Allowance” for the duration of the exhibition, a governmental support for new parents that is lacking in the US.

Maternity Leave was featured in the first *New Maternalisms* exhibition (2012). Later that same year, Clayton founded *An Artist Residency in Motherhood* – a structured, fully-funded artist residency that took place inside her own home. As Clayton notes on her website, artist residencies are usually designed to allow artists to escape from the routines and responsibilities of their everyday lives. *An Artist Residency in Motherhood*, set firmly inside the “inhospitable” environment of a family home, subverts the art-world’s romanticization of the unattached artist and frames motherhood not as hidden labour but as a valuable site for artistic exploration and production. For the duration of the residency (2012–2015), Clayton embraced the fragmented mental focus, nap-length studio time, countless distractions, and absurd poetry of life with young children as her working materials rather than as obstacles to be overcome.⁴ *New Maternalisms: Redux* featured work from the *Residency* (the video triptych *The Distance I Can Be From My Son*, the video *A Nice Family Portrait*, the drawing *Mother’s Days*, the instruction piece *Childproofing as Sculptural Practice*) alongside Clayton’s artist

statement and business cards for the *Residency*. In addition to these, Clayton instigated a new work, *The Red Thread*, invented in collaboration with writer Amy Krouse Rosenthal.

The Red Thread is an ongoing series of \$999 grants that are indefinitely passed along from one artist/mother to another.⁵ The money is used to create time, space, support, or other resources needed for a recipient to continue their creative work. By accepting the *Red Thread* each recipient agrees to pass the same amount of money along to another woman in the future, as soon as they are able to, whether this is weeks, months, or years later. A *Red Thread* can be begun by anybody, each separate strand continuing along its own timeline. *The Red Thread* emerged from Clayton’s *Residency* work and was funded as a part of *New Maternalisms: Redux*, a kind of parting gift connecting it to future artists working in the area; it was presented to artist Alana Hunt of East Kimberely, Australia.





1



THE RELECTION

Within the contemporary art world there are many strong static image-based works, particularly photographic, that offer representational intervention into commonplace visual cultural regimes surrounding maternal bodies. The Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra, for example, presents large scale documentary portraits of women in their homes, made shortly after each has given birth, offering up for our gaze the visual texture of the post-partum body: in *Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29 1994*, Julie wears medical pants and a sanitary towel, in *Tecla, Amsterdam, Netherlands, May 16 1994* there is a trickle of blood down the inside of Tecla's left leg, and, in *Saskia, Harderwijk, Netherlands, March 16 1994*, Saskia displays the scar of a recent caesarean operation on her belly. Each mother holds their newborn, but stares directly at the camera, naturalizing the post-partum maternal body without any of the abjection generally associated with either its visibility or its erasure. In another well-known example, Renée Cox's *Yo' Mama* (1993) challenges commonplace Madonnaesque representations of a soft, sanitized, docile — and predominantly white — maternal body, gazing dotingly at her cooing infant. Instead, Cox stands, muscles taught, holding her son in front of her, perpendicular to the ground. The pose is rhetorical. The child looks directly at the camera, as does the mother. This is a mother and child duo ready to face the world, to act, not stuck in the looping narcissism of the dyadic imaginary. Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004), on the other hand, does enact this dyadic pose, but only to queer it. Opie gazes at her nursing son who, taking up the entire lower third of the frame, seems to crowd its edges only to emphasize the US American early 21st century norm Opie and her son are breaking by nursing past the first year. The word "pervert" is visible on her chest, scarified from an earlier performance-based photo self-portrait.⁶ Her flushed, butch body gazing down at her son subverts the reproductive availability and heteronormative desirability embedded in the maternal Madonna images referenced by the lush fabric backdrop for Opie's act of nursing. Images like Cox's, Opie's, and Distras are well-circulated and evidence the power of images to not only express hegemonic power relations, but also to resist them. In contradistinction, the performance-

based practices gathered together for *New Maternalisms: Redux* take the maternal not as content but as *form*, much in the same way that Nicolas Bourriaud famously named *relation* as form in his 1998 collection of essays *Relational Aesthetics* or Grant Kester named *dialogue* as form in his 2004 *Conversation Pieces*.⁷

Being responsible for a small human — with its ridiculous prematurity and its cries, needs, and demands structuring the rhythms and movements of my day — has taught me much about the importance of responsive ecologies of care. The care at stake here is not romantic; it is not blissful. It is about attunement, and what it takes to flourish as a responsive ecosystem, now and into the future. This future is not the monolithic future Lee Edelman invokes in his well-known polemic — that is, not a future that is all about the Law Of The Father and the reproduction of the same — but it is instead a thoroughly queer and, to use Bracha Ettinger's term, *matrixial* future, one that we must feel our way forward into, together, without clear scripts; one that demands generative, expansive, creative re-imaginings of some of our most cherished figures.⁸ The maternal is one of these. With both Edelman and Ettinger in my ears I say: FUCK the earth as mother and FUCK all that never-ending, Giving Tree nonsense.⁹ The maternal, taken seriously as a politics and ethics, is no endless font of plenitude. It is a finite, responsive relation that both gives and needs care, especially care demanding creativity and experiment — and these are the qualities that drew me to the work featured through these exhibitions and in this volume. Taking the maternal as *material form*, the works in *New Maternalisms* intervene into and reconfigure normative maternal imaginaries, offering the maternal not as a noun but a verb — as an affective enmeshment, participatory practice, and situated political prompt.

Courtney Kessel's status as a single working mother of an older child colours her choice to work with her daughter as an active collaborator; Jill Miller's eldest son being diagnosed on the autism-spectrum gave rise to her video work *Homeschooled*; Lenka Clayton's status as a foreign national in the US formed the conditions of possibility for her *Maternity*

Leave; Alejandra Herrera's upbringing under dictatorship in Chile informs the intense activity of her performances; and Toronto-based Jess Dobkin's struggles with nursing transformed the development of *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar*. These works are personal, certainly, but they are neither biologically reductive nor reductively biographical. Instead, they take the personal as a necessary starting point for structural interrogation and political intervention. ■

— Natalie Loveless, April 2017

FOOTNOTES

¹ New materialism—a term developed by both Rosi Braidotti and Manuel DeLanda—attends to biological and material specificity in the context of a non-anthropocentric worldview and works to problematize the ontological categories that underpin our thinking of ourselves as separate from each other and the world around us. See, amongst others, the edited volumes *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds.) and *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Open University Press, 2013; Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, eds.).

² Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28:3 (2003).

³ www.maternalecologies.ca. Natalie Loveless, "Maternal Ecologies" in Amber Kinser, Kryn Freehling-Burton and Terri Hawkes, eds., *Performing Motherhood: Artistic, Activist, and Everyday Enactments* (Demeter Press, 2014).

⁴ An Artist Residency in Motherhood is now available as an open-source, self-directed residency or any artist/parent, and there are currently over 350 artists-in-residence in 33 countries around the world. <http://www.artistresidencyinmotherhood.com/>

⁵ <http://www.artistresidencyinmotherhood.com/redthread/>

⁶ <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/12201>

⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Les Presses Du Reel, 1998); Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces* (University of California Press, 2004).

⁸ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2004); Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁹ I am here, of course, echoing Edelman's oft-quoted sentence "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop." *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 29.

ENTRE NOUS:
MOMENTS, HOLES AND **STUFF**

Deirdre M. Donoghue on the Maternal Aesthetics of Courtney Kessel



ENTRE NOUS: MOMENTS, HOLES AND **STUFF**

Deirdre M. Donoghue on the Maternal Aesthetics of Courtney Kessel

In partial protest, I am putting the mother in the gallery. She is not the idealized mother painted with glowing beams of light smiling down at her child, but the real subjective, elated, grumpy, sexy, frustrated, proud mother who wishes to express herself in that space, not to be spoken for. I have been thinking, researching and making work on these lines for ten years. In that time I have been able to organize the work into three seemingly arbitrary categories of 'moments', 'holes' and 'stuff'.¹

New Maternalisms: Redux curated by Natalie Loveless and held in parallel to the international colloquium *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics and the Anthropocene*, organized by Natalie Loveless and Sheena Wilson, featured works of five artists representing a range of maternal experience. In what follows I describe three artworks by Courtney Kessel *in situ*, as I encountered them at the opening of *New Maternalisms: Redux*, and offer a set of theoretical parameters for locating Kessel's work within the field of maternal aesthetics.²

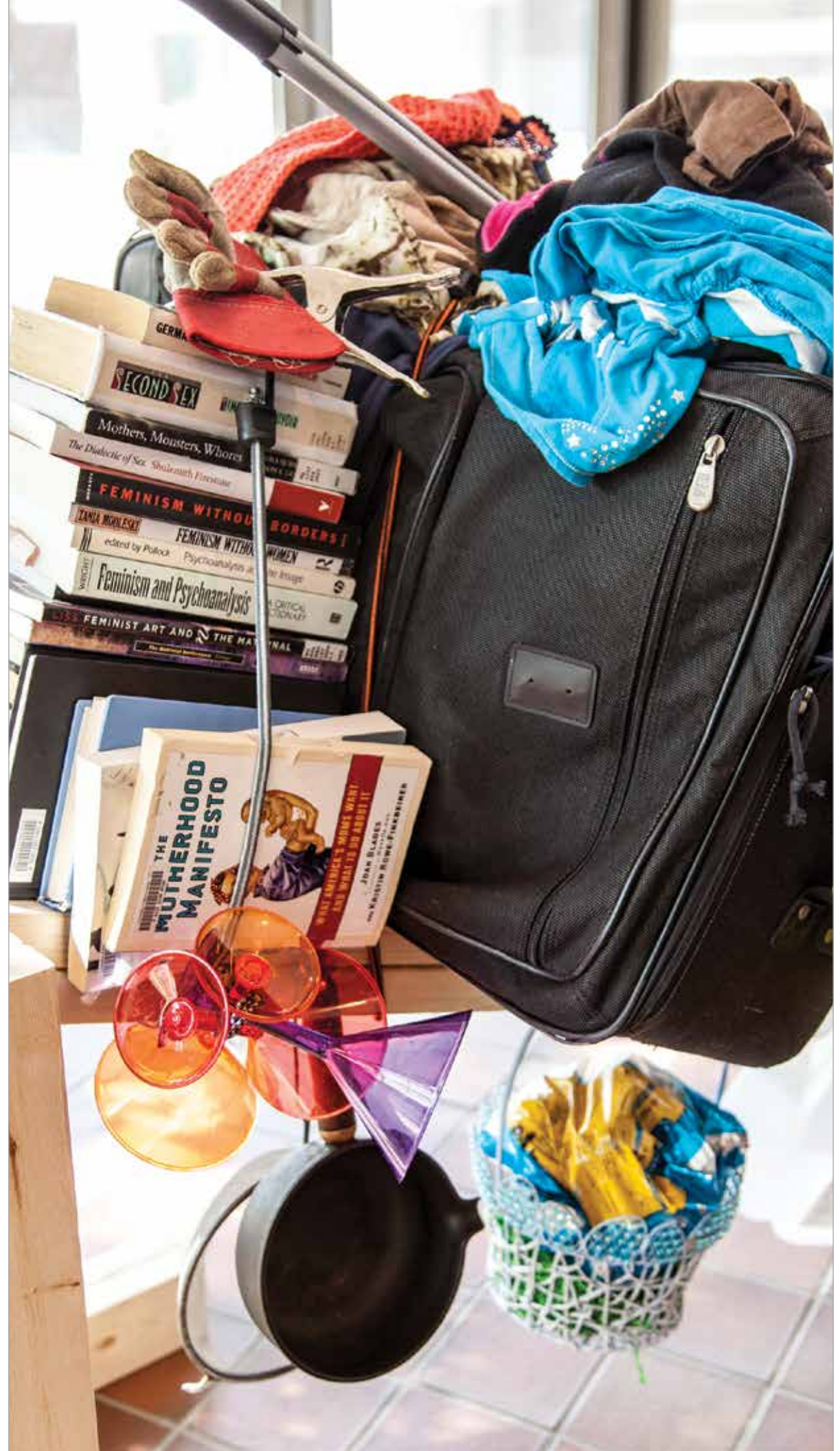
Sharing Space—moments

Three small screens mounted on the gallery wall as a muted triptych

i

A low-lit, white wall is cut into a rectangular shape by the video camera's lens. An industrial, wooden chair is visible in the middle of the screen. The video image is stationary and mute. A woman walks into the frame from the right, turns around, and sits on the chair to face us. She is wearing casual clothes: a black cardigan with a white stripe running across the front and down along both sleeves. Her gaze meets our eyes. A young girl appears from the left, wearing a white and grey, stripy dress with an orange flower made of cloth attached to the front, matching the woman's nail polish. A delicate tangle in her hair, she enters from her world beyond the frame into the shared space of the screen. The woman directs her gaze onto the girl. The girl sits on the woman's lap. Both facing the camera, the likeness of mother and daughter becomes clear.

The girl, about eight years of age, twists her body towards her mother's. Slipping her right hand into the mother's cardigan she begins to work





figures 1 & 2 | Courtney Kessel and Chloé | *Sharing Space*, 2012

her arm through the sleeve. Pushing her arm through, whilst pulling from the lapels with her free hand, she watches her fingers emerge from the opening of the sleeve right next to the hand of her mother (**fig 1**). She then attempts the same with her left arm. After some struggle, she manages to glide her arm through. Her much smaller hands come to rest on the mother's wrists. This is as far as they reach.

For a brief moment the cardigan's white stripe forms a unifying line running across the two bodies, creating the resemblance of a joint skeletal structure. They fix their gaze onto the viewer and almost simultaneously the image fades to black. It is all over in just thirty-two seconds.

ii

A woman wearing a light blue t-shirt sits on a chair facing the camera. Her arms are awkwardly stretched out to the side, dangling forward in an angular manner from the elbows on. Long brown hair frames her face. She is smiling, eyes half closed, her gaze slightly inwards shutting the viewer out. Sitting on her lap is a young girl of approximately eight years of age. Like the woman, she too has long brown hair framing her face, and she too holds her eyes half shut and smiles. Draped under the same shirt, the girl's body mimics the movements of the woman as both of their arms and heads protrude out of the shirt's openings.

Wrapped inside the cloth's elasticity, their two bodies merge into a two-headed, four-legged beast enveloped by a common sack of cloth-skin. If one were to trace over just one frame of the video's moving imagery,

they would appear as a one-bodied, two-headed laughing crab, or perhaps a tentacled, octopus-like, jocund creature; a chimeric beast, with a bit of this and a bit of that all merged into a continuous, smooth plane of flesh, at once singular and several. The woman mouths a few words, but as the video has no sound we are denied access to what is being said. She then begins to roll up the soft cloth of the shirt, while the child simultaneously begins to stretch its collar wider in order to let her head pass through.

As the girl's head comes free through the stretchy opening and she slides out from under the shirt's weave, she fixes her gaze onto the viewer, acknowledging our presence for the first time. The mother's face and gaze are fixed upwards, her arms holding the shirt high and wide to allow for the girl to move apart (**fig 2**). The girl playfully slides onto the floor and out of the frame. Laughing, the mother, too, stands up and walks out of the frame. The one minute and fifty-four-second long video comes to an end.

iii

The image opens up onto a woman and a girl swathed inside an orange shirt covering their upper bodies like a thin, stretchy membrane. Moving their arms, held together by the shirt's long sleeves, they adjust their bodies inside the supple material of the cloth. They exchange a few, silent to us, words in an intimate pose resembling—to me—the unassuming closeness between mothers and children in Mary Cassatt's paintings.³ Then, in agreement, they stand up and walk out of the frame.

Looking at the shapes their joined-together bodies form, as they awkwardly move across the screen, wrapped inside the same piece of clothing, for a brief moment it becomes hard to say whether the girl is carrying the woman on her back or whether the woman is growing out of the girl's back; whether the girl is an appendix hanging down from the woman's front, or whether this polymorphous form is in fact just one creature with four legs and two heads (**fig 3**). However, it is in the fleeting gesture of an almost-kiss, when their faces almost caress each other and their lips nearly touch, that a complete trust and openness towards



figures 3 & 4 | Courtney Kessel and Chloé | *Sharing Space*, 2012

the Other becomes enacted (fig 4). “The kiss allows an exchange to take place without demarcations. It becomes impossible to distinguish whose fluid is which, or where it comes from. This means that it is very different from the concepts of ownership and property. There can be no mastery if the kiss is to remain one of mutual openness and vulnerability rather than domination of one by the other.”⁴

Breaking away from their playful, bodily interaction, the mother’s gaze meets that of the viewer for the briefest of moments. Simultaneously, her body continues to respond to and accommodate itself to the physical sensations created by the pressures and tensions performed by the child’s body touching hers, *corps-à-corps*. The twenty-second long scene seems to be over almost as soon as it begins.

— — —

In each of the shorts that together form the triptych *Sharing Space* (2012), Kessel’s framing has left nowhere for our gaze to go than directly onto the two bodies of mother and daughter. We are simply face-to-face with the action performed in front of us. Yet, although the formal elements of the scene, such as the framing, choreography, editing, etc. suggest that these actions are performed with a viewer in mind, the interaction between the bodies of mother and daughter seems to be cocooned in an intimacy that is impenetrable by the viewer’s gaze.

It is hard not to make comparisons with the imagery of Madonna and Child. Only here the Madonna is active and birthing; the child a girl, not

a boy; the mother fleshy and embodied, a desiring being with *jouissance*.⁵ Kessel’s Madonna is at once available to the child, whilst at the same time not being absorbed by her. Through the playful, creative, and repeated activity of becoming at once one and multiple, singular and several, Kessel’s work locates the maternal body as a site for the possibility of a more porous notion of subjectivity. Indeed, it is this constant negotiation, reconfiguration, and “co-emergence” of borders and space/s between the “I” and the “non-I” that is a running thread through all of Kessel’s work.

In Balance With — stuff

*It is apparent in my work that I have made a definitive choice to be transparent about my maternity. In fact, I use it as a vehicle for discussion. Placing the private and domestic in the gallery, performs a maternal visibility that has not often been seen, let alone, been permitted.*⁷

A long wooden structure cuts a line across FAB Gallery’s open space. A robust stand with an almost five-meter long pinewood board rests hinged onto it. In the corner of the gallery is a piled-up assemblage of seemingly random domestic stuff. The oversized seesaw looks rough and rudimentary, and as an object is perhaps best described as functional. Its plain, somewhat unfinished state suggests that what is important here is perhaps not so much the object but what it can facilitate: a particular movement, a back and forth, an up and down between two interconnected points. A proposition.

Titled *In Balance With*, this sculptural installation and performance piece is placed between Kessel’s two other works, *Sharing Space* and *Without Chloé*, each mounted onto the two nearby walls. A windowed gallery wall forms a backdrop to the piece, rendering the street and the people outside visible to those inside the gallery and vice versa, merging the two worlds into each other (figs 5, 6, & 7). During the opening, the gallery is busy with people talking and moving. Chloé Clevenger, the artist’s eleven-year old daughter, approaches the wooden structure and climbs onto it. Crossing her legs in front of her body and making herself comfortable,



figures 5, 6 & 7 (opposite) | Courtney Kessel and Chloé | *In Balance With*, 2014

she leans against the small backrest at her end of the seesaw. Sixteen feet away at the other end, Kessel-the-artist is talking with gallery visitors, while at the same time fully aware of Clevenger’s movements.

Moving away from the visitors, Kessel steps towards the seesaw and towards Clevenger whose body is weighing the wooden board all the way down to the floor. She begins applying her body weight onto the seesaw, forcing the wooden board to lower down, simultaneously raising Clevenger off the floor at the other end of the room. As Kessel-the-mother-and-the-artist pulls her body onto the seesaw it sways off-balance bringing her down to the ground and Clevenger-the-daughter-and-collaborator high up in the air, her legs still crossed, drawing in her notebook, seemingly unfazed by her mother-the-artist’s activities.

From here on, the audience witnesses a slow process of Kessel-the-artist-and-mother moving between Clevenger, the seesaw, and the heap of stuff at the corner of the gallery: a crate full of toys, books on feminist art and theory, numerous LPs, children’s books, a lamp, paint brushes, masking tape, a staple gun, paint, a suitcase overflowing with laundry... a jerry can filled with water... a melon... bag of potatoes... net of oranges... a pillow for Clevenger... apples for Clevenger... Kessel’s shoes... a broom... a dustpan... the dust from the floor, each object telling the story of their lives together, and the different daily roles and spaces they inhabit and traverse (fig 8).⁸

Item by item, Kessel-the-artist-and-mother carries all of this “stuff” into the centre, securing it onto the wooden structure under, around, and

in-front of her daughter, who throughout the entire performance remains detached and disinterested in both the volume of the audience and the continuous physical labour that Kessel-her-mother-the-artist is performing through her repeated actions in an orbit around her — actions that enact the artist’s care and domestic labour as a mother-whose-work-is-never-done. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir: “Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present ... Eating, sleeping, cleaning — the years no longer rise up towards heaven, they lie spread out ahead, grey and identical.”⁹

Every now and again, Kessel-the-artist-and-mother walks over to the far end of the structure and performs the strained effort of pulling herself onto the seesaw in order to see whether the accumulated weight piled onto it has reached the desired equilibrium yet — a perfect balance between mother and child, facilitated by objects of distraction and



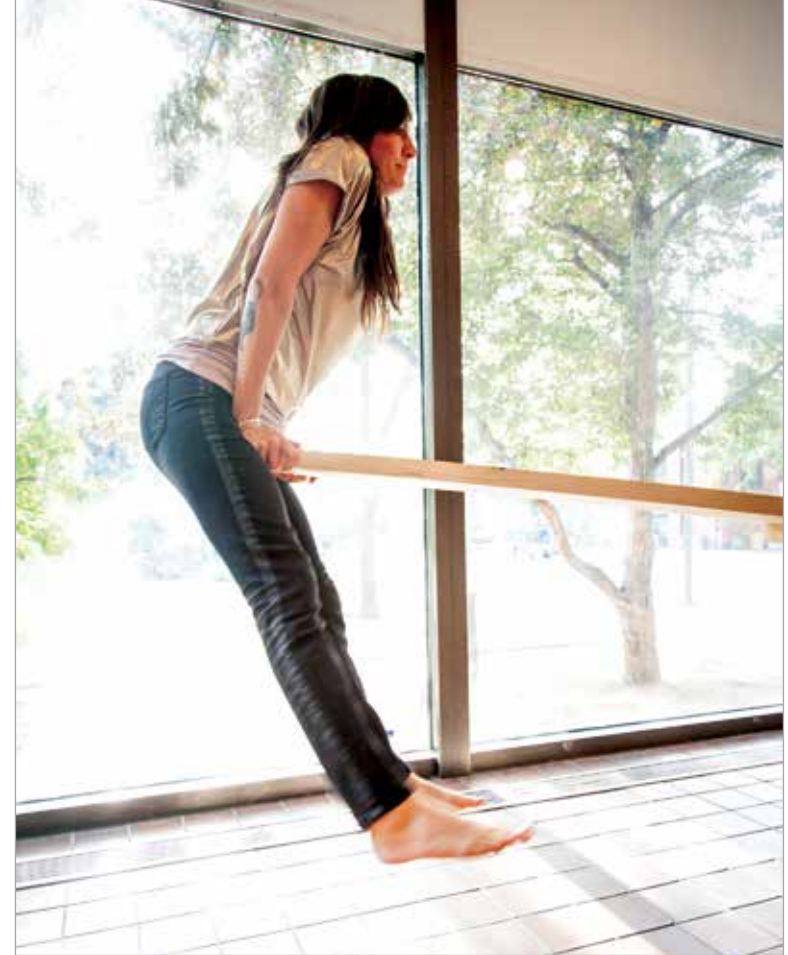


sustenance. As we observe the performance unfolding we see that the more stuff is placed onto the seesaw, the heavier the business of lowering it becomes and the more physically strenuous the task. Kessel has to jump up in the air, lunge her weight forward onto the wooden board, push through her arms to support her body and keep her weight on the seesaw, then try to lower the seesaw far enough down so as to be able to sit on it (fig 9). The more stuff is accumulated, the more Kessel struggles to heave her body up and we see the muscles in her arms begin to spasm.

Eventually, the seesaw reaches a balance between the two points of mother and child, but the performance is not finished until Clevenger is ready to end it by moving off the seesaw, leaving Kessel-the-artist-and-mother, and to some extent the audience, hanging in an elongated moment of un-resolve as to when the performance will end.¹⁰

While Kessel-the-artist-and-mother waits, together with the audience, Clevenger simply carries on with her own activities, unconcerned by her surroundings beyond the page of the book she is reading and the drawings she is making in her notebook. As Kessel states in an interview with Christina La Master for *Cultural Reproducers* “[t]he first time we performed *In Balance With* I had NO idea how it would end! It wasn’t until we had reached a balance that I asked if she wanted to come down. She said ‘No.’ It was then that I realized the piece would be over when *she* was ‘finished’ with it. It became a direct reference about me and my work. I could not do my work unless she was occupied and content. When she is done with something or needs something, I am interrupted with the unknown timeframe as to when I will be able to return to my work.”¹¹

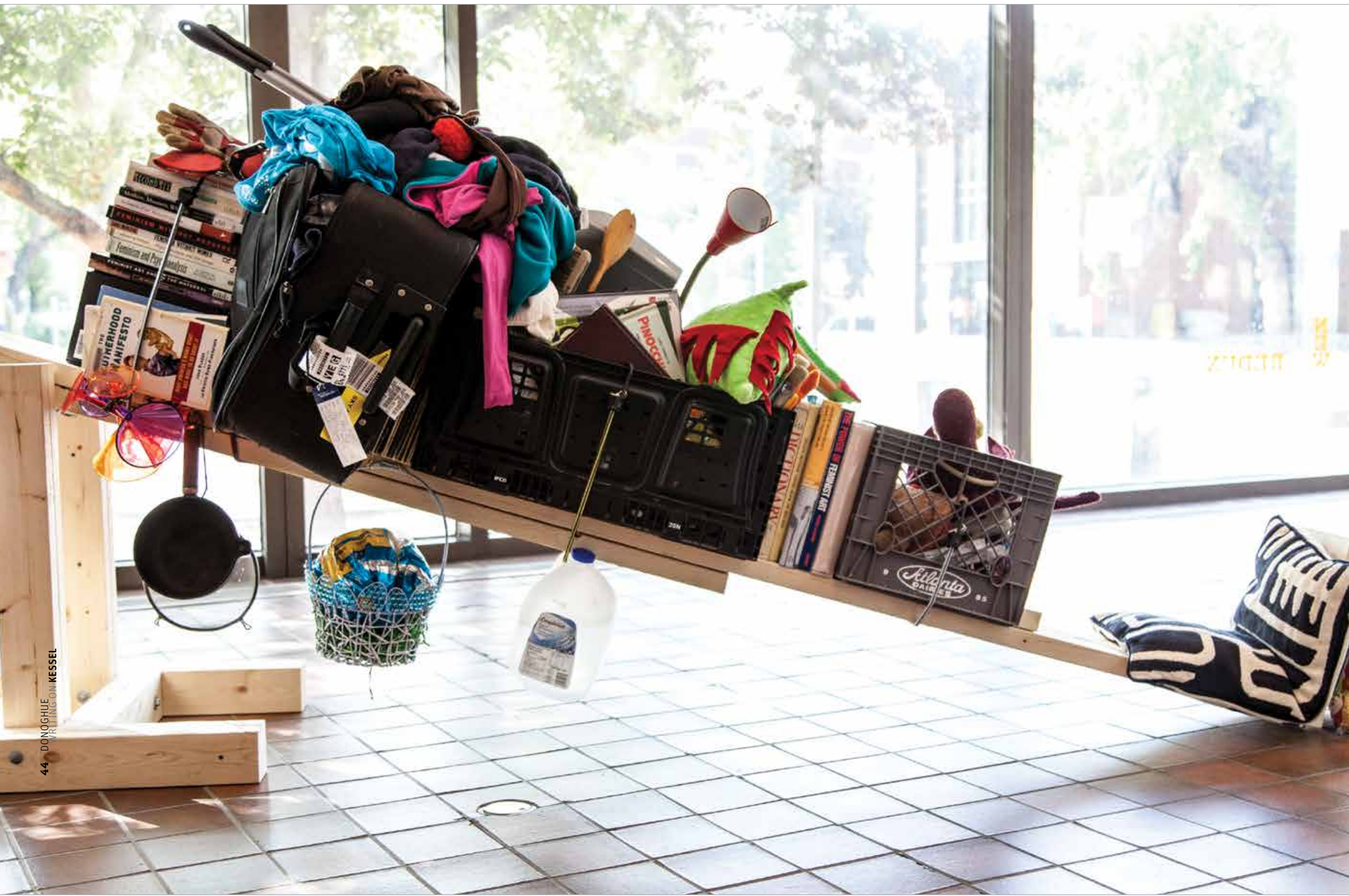
In her book *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and The Politics of Reproduction*, Lisa Guenther refers to Hannah Arendt’s term *Vita Activa*, “a life of active engagement with other people and the world.”¹² Guenther lays out how Arendt divides the notion of the active life into three distinct categories: labour, work, and action. “For Arendt labour refers to the basic activities that sustain the biological life of the human body: processes such as growing food, tending sheep, baking bread, and reproducing the



figures 8, 9 & 10 (overleaf) | Courtney Kessel and Chloé | *In Balance With*, 2014

species. The need for labour renews itself constantly, and so its tasks must be repeated endlessly; they cannot be accomplished for once and for all.”¹³ Because of its cyclical and endless nature, the category of labour thus lacks any direct political significance.¹⁴ Kessel, framing (her) labour within the aesthetics of an artwork, transforms (her) maternal and caring labour into “action” and a force of political resonance.

As a work of art, *In Balance With* teases out multiple, simultaneous movements and forces. There is the tension “drawn” through the gallery space by the line of the seesaw visually connecting mother and daughter, artist and dependent. There is the up-and-down movement of the seesaw, which is suggestive of a possibility of equal movement and equilibrium, yet which at the same time renders visible the struggle and constant, active (re-)negotiation of relations. There is the weight of mother vs. daughter, suggestive of hierarchy and an imbalance of power. There is also the orbiting of Kessel around Clevenger as she cares for her daughter, simultaneously and painstakingly weaving her caring labour into a work of art. Lastly, there is the detail of time: the work has been performed at least once a year since 2010 (when Clevenger was six years old) and Kessel’s intention is to keep performing the piece as long as Clevenger is a willing participant. An iterative, multi-year work,



its basic parameters remain the same as time passes, but the performers themselves transform over time. The “stuff” around them changes, too, reflecting their daily lives at that moment, in that year, and thus each iteration becomes organized by new objects, and by the passage of time that marks Clevenger’s growth from child to teenager (fig 10).

Without Chloé – holes

...When my daughter says that the work is all about her, I say that no actually it is about me, and my particular experience of being a mother. My work is not just ‘about’ you, it is because of you... .¹⁵

The photographic series *Without Chloé* (2016) consists of images depicting domestic spaces from the artist’s own home (figs 11 & 12). A medium close-up of a bookshelf; a partial view of a living room opening onto a small hallway and into another room through an open door-frame; a medium close-up of a hallway; a refrigerator door; a work desk with a pin up board above it; the corner of a living-room workspace. Each image crammed with visual detail of household objects, personal belongings, art materials, notes, drawings, photographs, and knick-knacks of all sorts, sprawled across the domestic surfaces and compressed here into flat, two-dimensional visual fields.

What at first appears to be a series of quick snapshots enlarged to an unusual size, upon closer inspection reveals patches and holes of irregular shapes left behind by cutting through the photographic surfaces with an x-acto blade. In some of the prints the cuttings are blatantly obvious, in others almost invisible. Each cut leaves behind detailed outlines of the numerous objects that they have intended, but ultimately failed, to remove from the images. There seems, at first glance, to be no obvious criteria regarding what the selection of erasure is based on, however, the series title, *Without Chloé*, directs us towards how to read these images: “The current work deals with the domestic space and the ‘stuff’ of having a child. I’ve been photographing spaces in my home then taking the prints and cutting out everything that is about Chloé, by Chloé, or of Chloé....”¹⁶



figure 11 | Courtney Kessel and Chloé | *Without Chloé*, 2016

The holes left behind on the photographic prints reveal patches of the gallery wall, and the outlines of the cut-out objects produce shadows that almost seem to render visible the carefully removed signifiers. The “neutral” surface of the gallery wall seeps and merges into the images, while at the same time the cut-out traces – the missing indices of Kessel’s daughter – seep through the holes and become projected back onto the gallery wall in a play that blends that space between the public and the private, the artist and the mother, the domestic and the gallery. Such play is a characteristic consistently present in Kessel’s work, as she traces, measures, juxtaposes, performs, and re-enacts her maternal experience at the threshold between ‘mother’ and ‘artist’.

In the last decade there has been an exponentially steady rise in the number of artists turning towards their maternal experience and labour



figure 12 | Courtney Kessel and Chloé | *Without Chloé* (detail), 2016

as artistic material. Amongst the works and practices that have made their way into the light of day it is possible to see some loose aesthetic categories forming.¹⁷ In her essay “Maternal Art Practices: In Support of New Maternalist Aesthetic Forms,” Eti Wade has identified five such categories: “Maternalist Materiality,” “Maternal Refraction,” “Intersubjective Maternalist Trace,” “Politicized Maternal Multiplicity,” and “Performance and the Raw Every-Day.”¹⁸ These categories describe five distinct ways in which artist-mothers work with their maternal material. The first category of “Maternalist Materiality” accounts for works whose primary material is the maternal body “the embodied dimension of maternal subjectivity.”¹⁹ Artworks that Wade identifies as belonging to this category also include works that use materials exclusively derived from the maternal body, such as breast milk. “Maternalist Refraction” accounts for pictorial representations of children seen through the mother’s eyes, reflecting the maternal subjectivity of the maker and capturing their maternal gaze. “Intersubjective Maternalist Trace” describes artworks where the creative gestures of early childhood mark-making become incorporated into the artist-mother’s creative process, and where the final artwork is created in a responsive, creative dialogue between artist-mother and her child. “Politicized Maternal Multiplicity” describes events, gatherings, cultural platforms, and networks organized by artist-mothers in order to fight maternal and artistic isolation and to offer support and solidarity as a means for continued artistic practice. Wade’s fifth category, “Performance and the Raw Every-Day,” consists of artworks that use the everyday maternal experiences,

objects, and events of the artist-mother as material for performance-based artworks and processes.

These categories, as mapped out by Wade, seem to correlate with where the artist happens to be in her own maternal journey. In other words, the category the artist inhabits changes depending on whether she is mothering an infant, a young toddler, a pre-adolescent, a child in puberty, a young adult, or a grown-up “child.” As each of these relational stages has its own particular challenges, it is then not uncommon that mothers with similarly aged children might also deal with similar pressures and interests.²⁰ Each stage along one’s maternal journey presents new affective encounters, experiences, and theoretical insights, and each encounter leads to new aesthetic (re-)workings of these close and affective ethical relations with a radically dependent “other.” For example, it is not uncommon for an artist-mother to a young infant to be drawn to the suddenly new and available aesthetic material of her own (and other’s) maternal body or bodies and to create art that Wade identifies as “Maternalist Materiality.” Similarly, it is not uncommon for artist-mothers to pre-school children to gravitate towards the activism inherent in “Politicized Maternal Collectivity,” setting-up and participating in shared networks, platforms, and working environments that function as alternative models of care work and artistic autonomy; examples here include *Cultural Re-Producers*, *Invisible Spaces of Parenthood*, *m/other voices foundation*, and *The Mother House*.²¹

Within Wade’s five categories, Kessel’s work is exemplary of a performance-based practice fitting under the heading “Performance and the Raw Every-Day.” Inhabiting this category, Kessel’s work embraces maternal subjectivity of being at once singular and multiple. That is, her work proposes the maternal condition of multiplicity as a site for artistic creation and embraces it as a methodology for creative process and production. In Kessel’s work, to “perform the raw every-day” is to stay with, and make artwork on and from, the porous thresholds of maternal inter-subjectivity. Kessel’s work invites us into a maternal (aesth)ethics of care through the cross-pollination of artistic labour and maternal encounter. Through this, the work re-imagines the domains

of the social and the political in terms of its fundamental relationality, inviting us to work toward a common and a shared future that is always in negotiation. ■

FOOTNOTES

¹ Courtney Kessel, Artist Feature in *So to Speak*, Spring 2016. <http://sotospeakjournal.org/courtney-kessel/>

² *New Maternalisms: Redux*, hosted by the Fine Arts Building Gallery (FAB Gallery), University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, took place between May 12 and June 4, 2016. <http://newmaternalisms.com/2016-exhibition-overview/>

The *Mapping the Maternal* colloquium took place at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, May 11 to May 14, 2016. The three artworks by Kessel that I will be treating are the video triptych *Sharing Space*, the action-based performance *In Balance With*, and the photographic series *Without Chloé*, and were featured in the *New Maternalisms: Redux* opening on May 12, 2016.

³ I am thinking here specifically works like *Mother Jean Nursing Her Baby* (1908) and *Mother Combing Her Child's Hair* (1879).

⁴ Hanneke Canters and Grace M. Jantzen, *Forever Fluid: A Reading of Luce Irigaray's Elemental Passions* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 108.

⁵ For feminist applications of “jouissance,” see for example Luce Irigaray, “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother,” in *The Irigaray Reader*, Margaret Whitford, ed., trans. David Macey, (Cambridge, USA & Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1991), 34–46.; and Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

⁶ Bracha L. Ettinger, “Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event,” in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Brian Massumi, ed., Foreword by Griselda Pollock, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁷ Courtney Kessel in an interview with Christina La Master, *Cultural ReProducers*, 2015. <http://www.culturalreproducers.org/2015/06/interview-courtney-kessel.html>

⁸ As I will return to below, with each iteration of the performance (which has been performed once a year since Clevenger was six) the materials added onto the seesaw change, an index of their personal lives at that very moment in time.

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, (New York: Bantam Books, 1952), 487.

¹⁰ The duration of the performance is always dictated by when Clevenger has had enough and wants to get off the seesaw, thus ending the performance, whether “in balance with” or not.

¹¹ Courtney Kessel in an interview with Christina La Master, *Cultural ReProducers*, (2015). <http://www.culturalreproducers.org/2015/06/interview-courtney-kessel.html>

¹² Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of The Other: Levinas and The Politics of Reproduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵ Courtney Kessel, *The Eternal Maternal in m/other voices*, (2015).

<https://www.mothervoices.org/column/2015/9/21/eternal-maternal>

¹⁶ Courtney Kessel in an interview with Christina La Master, *Cultural ReProducers*, (2015).

<http://www.culturalreproducers.org/2015/06/interview-courtney-kessel.html>

¹⁷ For artists using their maternal experience and subjectivity as artistic material, see for example: *An Artist Residency in Motherhood*: www.artistresidencyinmotherhood.com; *Artist Parent Index*: www.artistparentindex.com; *Cultural Re-Producers*: www.culturalreproducers.org; *m/other voices Foundation for Art, Research, Theory, Dialogue & Community Involvement*: www.mothervoices.org; *New Maternalisms*: www.newmaternalisms.com; ‘Studies in the Maternal’: www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk; The Egg, The Womb, The Head and The Moon: www.eggwombheadmoon.com. To gain a more grounded genealogical sense, see for example: Rachel Epp-Buller, *Reconciling Art and Mothering* (Ashgate Publishing Limited and Routledge, 2012); *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein, eds., (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2011); Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2008.)

¹⁸ Eti Wade, “Maternal Art Practices: In Support of New Maternalist Aesthetic Forms” in *New Maternalisms: Tales of Motherwork (Dislodging the Unthinkable)*, Roksana Badruddoja and Maki Motapanyane, eds., (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2016), 274–293.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Clearly there are also other factors, such class, race, and geographic location that play into this.

²¹ *Cultural Re-Producers* is a creative platform, web resource, and community-based project for creative cultural workers across disciplines. It was founded in 2012 by artist and mother Christa Donner with the aim of making “the art world a more inclusive and interesting place by supporting arts professionals raising kids” (<http://www.culturalreproducers.org>). *Invisible Spaces of Parenthood (ISP)*, is a collaborative research practice organized by Andrea Francke and Kim Dhillon around questions about the political, pedagogical, social and economic structures around parenting and care labour today. ISP was initiated in London in 2010 by artist Andrea Francke and has since produced exhibitions, workshops, and publications (www.andreafrancke.me.uk). *m/other voices Foundation for Art, Research, Theory, Dialogue & Community Involvement* is a network of artists, writers, scholars, curators and art historians, functioning as a platform for the doing of maternal theory within the arts and other fields of cultural production. By considering the maternal as a practice and as a political and ethical force in our being in and with the world, the foundation explores relations between maternal labour, experience, thinking, ethics, and aesthetics in the production of knowledge within arts and beyond (<https://www.mothervoices.org>). *The Mother House* was a month-long pilot project that took place during the month of October 2016 at the *IKLECTIK Art Lab* in London. Created by Dyana Gravina (Procreate Project) and Amy Dignam (Desperate Art-wives), *The Mother House* was dedicated to supporting the work of mother-artists by providing them with a collective studio space that also accommodated the artist’s children. www.procreateproject.com/portfolio/the-mother-house/



DEIRDRE M. DONOGHUE is a visual and performance artist, doula, and founding director of the international *m/other voices Foundation for Art, Research, Theory, Dialogue and Community Involvement*. She is currently writing her PhD thesis on maternal subjectivities, materiality, aesthetics, ethics, and affect at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry, University of Utrecht. Her video, performance, and installation work has been exhibited internationally. Organizational work includes *The Mothernists – Conference and Art Exhibition*, Rotterdam (2015), to which she is currently working on a follow up. She is also a founding member of *ADA, Area for Debate and Art*, where she co-organized and developed its public program between 2008 and 2015. Recent publications include “Resonant Bodies, Voices, Memories” (2009), “Pick Up This Book” (2013), “Our House in The Middle of the Street” (2010), “When The Landscape Begins to Map the Cartographer” (2010), and *Chorografie* (2010). She is currently working on an essay called “In Search of The Maternal: Towards Microchimeric Bodies and Maternal Relational (Aesth)ethics” for Rachel Epp Buller and Charles Reeves (eds.), *Inappropriate Bodies: Art, Design and Maternity*, Demeter Press. She is a mother of two.

COURTNEY KESSEL is a mother, artist, academic, and arts administrator living and working in Athens, Ohio. Through sculpture, photography, performance, video, and sound, Kessel’s work strives to make visible the quiet, understated, and often unseen love and labour of motherhood. In the annual performance piece, *In Balance With* (2009 – present), Kessel presents a version of the maternal which investigates collaboration with her daughter, Chloé, as a visible, changeable aspect of mothering. Other projects include the solo exhibition, *Mother Lode* (2014), *Symphony of the Domestic II* (2015), *Cut From the Same* (2013), the video *Sharing Space* (2012), and, most recently, *Fabric of Life and Making Up* (2016). Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Kessel completed an MFA in Sculpture & Expanded Practices and a certificate in Women’s & Gender Studies from Ohio University (2012) and received a BFA in Sculpture from Tyler School of Art (1998). Kessel has exhibited her work nationally and internationally, including *New Maternalisms, Chile* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Santiago Chile, *FAMILY MATTERS: Living and Representing Today’s Family*, Centre for Contemporary Culture Strozziina, Florence, Italy, the Tampa Museum of Art, and Exit Art, New York. Kessel is the Gallery Director for the Ohio University Art Galleries and teaches in the School of Art + Design. Chloé is her only child.



ON DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS
IN THE **ANTHROPOCENE**

Rachel Epp Buller on the art of Jill Miller



ON DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Rachel Epp Buller on the art of Jill Miller



figure 1 | Jill Miller | *Body Configurations*, 2013

figure 2 | Jill Miller | *Blind Drawing*, 2013

figure 3 | Jill Miller | *The Milk Truck*, 2011–12

A mother and son contort their bodies in a doorway to create a living sculpture that bridges the space (fig 1). Two artists, one an adult and one a child, create a collaborative drawing on an agreed-upon theme (fig 2). An artist comes to the rescue of a mother who is shamed for breastfeeding in public (fig 3). Much of us artist Jill Miller's recent work revolves around creating and sustaining interpersonal, and often collaborative, relationships in the face of adversity, positioned specifically within a framework of maternity and care work. Frequently using humor and hyperbole, Miller plays with cultural assumptions about the maternal figure and offers space and visibility for the artist-mother in ways that push against stereotypes. Simultaneously, Miller raises questions that usher in ideas around larger social change. While much of Miller's recent work, particularly that involving her own children, might at first glance appear to be insular due to its focus on the mother-child relation, the *24-Hour Family Portraits*, *Big Balls*, *Blind Drawings*, *Body Configurations*, and *The Milk Truck* each establish contexts for interpersonal relationships in and around the family that I'd like to suggest — and this may to some seem like a surprising reading of the work — propose alternative ways of *relational being* for the geologic era now known as the Anthropocene.¹ It may be for this reason that the exhibition that this catalogue documents and in which Miller's work was featured, *New Maternalisms: Redux*, was held concurrently with an

international colloquium on *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene*. In their introductory comments for the colloquium, organizers Natalie S. Loveless and Sheena Wilson assert that in response to these compromised times, arts and humanities practitioners can offer “modes of sensuous, aesthetic attunement” to an Anthropocenic discourse.² Taking this to heart, I suggest that through her recent projects, Miller not only brings a heightened visibility to maternity in contemporary art contexts but also, more specifically, mobilizes maternal perspectives as political and ethical interventions that work toward achieving more equitable and humane relationships that are relevant to the era of the Anthropocene.

Miller's artistic focus on relationships offers clear parallels to art of the past decade that has been discussed as social practice, socially engaged, or participatory. Moving away from a long-standing model that privileges solitary artists creating objects in their studios for later consumption by the public, participatory art offers varied forms of interpersonal engagement between artist and/or audience members in public or museum spaces. Social art practices have gained increasing currency in recent years among contemporary artists but have also generated much critical debate. Many framings of this genre of art refer back to French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, in which he

emphasizes the positive social impact of art works that generate new person-to-person relations.³ In this text Bourriaud highlights a wide variety of artistic projects that construct social experiences, rather than discrete objects such as paintings or sculptures, and proposes that the ensuing relational exchanges *become the art itself*. Bourriaud asserts that such artist-facilitated shared activities result in new, democratic relationships that rise above the politically charged specifics of individual identity.⁴ Claire Bishop has been one of the most vocal critics of this relational art trend, arguing not only that much socially engaged, or participatory, art disregards aesthetics but also that such works most often do not in fact forge new democratic or emancipatory relationships and instead engage only art-world audiences who were already predisposed to form connections.⁵ In response to both, Kathryn Brown's recent edited volume of essays aims to seek out a middle ground. Building to some extent on Bishop's critique, Brown argues that art involving audience interaction "is neither a universal style nor a single type of experience."⁶ Accordingly, the essayists gathered together by Brown situate "interactive" contemporary artworks within their particular social, physical, artistic, and geographical milieus in order to more precisely discuss the types of relations produced. This dual emphasis on specificity of both context and type of relationship offers a useful lens through which to examine Jill Miller's work. More than just creating environments of relations, à la Bourriaud, Miller's work clearly establishes *feminist frameworks* for maternal relations. In so doing, Miller offers a counterpoint to Bourriaud's championing of relational art as fundamentally apolitical.

Helena Reckitt's 2015 critique of Bourriaud challenges his complete disregard of predecessors whose work laid the foundation for *Relational Aesthetics*, arguing that, "The absence of feminism is especially problematic in this context given how closely Bourriaud's projects emulate forms of affective and immaterial work that have long been areas of female activity and feminist analysis."⁷ Highlighting in particular the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Janine Antoni, which drew specific attention to practices of domestic and maternal labour and unrecognized care work, Reckitt explicates the ways in which Bourriaud's curatorial practices betray an attitude of amnesia, if not erasure. Bourriaud's relational

aesthetics strive to eliminate what he calls the "lobbies"⁸ of identity politics and instead focus on human relational experiences devoid of contexts of gender, race, or class; thus, argues Reckitt, pioneering feminist artists become "forgotten relations" in Bourriaud's art historical moment-without-a-lineage. Miller's relational projects addressing domestic and maternal labour specifically hearken back to models offered by feminist foremothers like Laderman Ukeles. Like many feminist activists before her, Miller begins her calls for change from the perspective of personal experience. Indeed, as Loveless argues of Miller and her co-exhibitors in the introduction to this catalogue, the personal becomes "a necessary starting point for structural interrogation and political intervention."⁹

The most public of Miller's maternal interventions focused on changing relationships and conversations around breastfeeding. Through an extended public performance, Miller confronted the unfriendly environment encountered by many US mothers who nurse in public. The project began when, after raising funds through a Kickstarter campaign in 2011, Miller purchased an old ice cream truck and converted it into a breastfeeding support vehicle.¹⁰ Miller envisioned that she would drive the truck around Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, offering support to nursing mothers, attending nursing-related events, and responding to breastfeeding emergencies. *The Milk Truck*, a mobile art installation and performance, was designed to empower nursing mothers, create community, raise awareness, and stimulate conversation around breastfeeding—and, as a truck topped by a 5-foot breast with a flashing nipple, it was a sight to behold.¹¹

With this work, Miller sought to reframe public relationships and conversations through two overlapping strategies: social and civic engagement, and humor. Initial drawings from the Kickstarter video showcased Miller's idealistic vision for the truck as a comfortable place where mothers from different walks of life might come together to support each other through breastfeeding (**fig 4**). Taking her realized project to the streets, Miller brought heightened visibility to breastfeeding and to the public conversations that circulate around it. Her mobile "breasturant"



figure 4 | Jill Miller | Kickstarter Campaign Video for *The Milk Truck*, 2011

made its debut at the 2011 Pittsburgh Biennial and September 12 of that year was declared *The Milk Truck Day* by the city council. By moving outside of the museum, Miller inserted *The Milk Truck* into public and civic discourse, intervening in a pointed, if humorous, way. Additionally, because instances of breastfeeding censorship are by nature tense encounters, Miller immediately defused the situation and disarmed potentially critical viewers by introducing an oversized, unexpected, ridiculous emergency vehicle. By implicitly poking fun at media-manufactured controversies around lactation, Miller took the focus off of the publicly debated breastfeeding body and put it squarely on the shoulders of the truck. As Miller herself said, “Thought the nursing mother created a spectacle? Meet *The Milk Truck*.”¹² Through its very presence, *The Milk Truck* “open[ed up] spaces for critical discourse and community connections”: drawing viewers in with the attention-garnering truck, Miller offered a space for public conversation and the potential for some eventual common ground on a socially divisive issue.¹³

Because *The Milk Truck* primarily functioned to facilitate discussion about breastfeeding and the censorship of breastfeeding in public, Miller’s project moved the focus away from the artist and toward the audience members with a primary goal of changing the dynamics of their social relationships. The Milk Truck offered a space for what Claire Bishop describes as the nature of participatory art, in which “the artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of *situations*.”¹⁴ While *The Milk Truck* might be considered a discrete object, carefully designed to draw as much attention as possible in a public space, its larger functions were to challenge,

defuse, question, and facilitate the relationships performed by the audience in any given breastfeeding emergency situation. Ultimately, Miller’s project revolved entirely around the varied audience members, alternately offering support to breastfeeding mothers who call for back-up in emergency situations, challenge to those who would censor breastfeeding in public, and implicitly issuing a call to all involved to reconsider their own views and, perhaps, forge new relationships.

While dealing with largely human social justice issues, Miller’s development of productive, collaborative relationships speaks directly to the need for altered relations in this new geologic era. A number of writers on the Anthropocene stress the need for collaboration in the future, a productive working-together across countries and cultures as we learn anew how to survive.¹⁶ There will be no return to an earlier way of life, but neither does the Anthropocene necessarily herald the apocalypse. Indeed, as Simon Dalby argues, “The point about the Anthropocene is that it is *the next time*, not *the end time* [emphasis mine], and hence focusing on making the future, rather than responding to danger, has to be the pedagogic priority.”¹⁷ A 2014 forum published by a group of geographers particularly raises the need to change our working relationships and begin collaborating across disciplinary fields, underscoring that we must learn how to live and work together in new ways for this new era. Dalby argues that “disciplinary silos will not help us address the larger pressing questions of the future context for humanity,”¹⁸ while Jessi Lehman and Sara Nelson assert that we must not only build coalitions across boundaries but also forge alliances “with activists and communities already engaged in struggle.”¹⁹ Simon Pope’s 2015 doctoral thesis details a model of artistic engagement with the Anthropocene that offers connections to Miller’s strategies as well. Pope turns a critical lens on his own earlier socially engaged art practices, which he later recognized as anthropocentric by engaging only with humans, and in new projects asks the question, “Who else participates with us?”²⁰ Pope now seeks to reveal layers of connection and relation between both people—from many and diverse backgrounds—and their environments. In doing so, and in acknowledging, like Dalby, that the Anthropocene is the “next time,” Pope calls on artists to bridge the ideological divide between

nature and culture by incorporating the *more-than-human*, which “encourages us to think of what exceeds and joins with the human, not what comes after its demise.”²¹ In recent elaborations, a student of Pope’s expanded upon his mentor’s thesis, arguing that the Anthropocene might also force us to become *more humane* as we attempt to sublimate our domineering tendencies and more equitably engage with all manner of life on this planet.²² Miller’s relational practices, I suggest, offer both collaborative engagement and a redressing of power structures in such a way as to privilege *more humane* and equitable attitudes toward our fellow beings, as well as an openness to future change.

As we negotiate the human position within the Anthropocene and consider ways forward, a turning-inward and a period of serious self-reflection seems warranted, and Miller’s artistic trajectory follows such an arc. Following *The Milk Truck*’s debut and year-long public presence in Pittsburgh, Miller and her family moved to the West Coast, where she for the next few years focused her artistic practice on sustaining and nurturing relationships, and drawing attention to the care work within her immediate family. Miller and her seven-year-old son Paxton, who is autistic, embarked on collaborative art-making ventures during a period of intensive homeschooling. Honoring children as active participants in an artistic collaboration challenges conventional definitions of makers. While not quite the *more-than-human* participatory project that Pope envisions, Miller’s willingness to cede control, at times following her son’s lead as instigator and at other times making decisions jointly, perhaps offers one model for relationships in the Anthropocene: if, in this new era, we must move away from an anthropocentric model of human domination over all life, then it cannot hurt to look to models of collaboration and of maternal, relational care *alongside* more properly “multi-species” approaches²³, for the strategies by which we might achieve a new geo-equilibrium.

For example, in *Body Configurations*, a series of staged performance photographs, Miller and her son collaborate with each other and with their environment, upending the parent-child hierarchy and physically adapting their bodies to respond to the domestic setting in unexpected

ways. In one photograph, Miller and her son extend their bodies across the galley kitchen, becoming one with the space. Miller’s son lies face-down on the countertop, part of his torso hanging in the air as his body spans the corner. He buries his face in his arms and stretches out his legs, pointing his toes so that they nearly touch the stovetop. Miller’s form offers the mirror inverse of her son’s body: face-up on the floor, she covers her face with her arms and extends her feet beneath the counter. The rest of the kitchen bears indications of life-in-progress: a jug of water; a stockpot on the stove; a bowl of fruit; dishes in the sink. The human forms become just one more part of the setting, no more or less important than the plants by the kitchen window. In a second photograph, Miller and her son mirror each other in such a way as to frame the domestic space. Miller flexes her body upward from the middle step of a stairway while her son balances his body on the handrails, arcing above her; together, they form a circular space through and around which the viewer sees a hallway, an open bathroom door, and signs of domestic clutter. Miller does not pretend to offer a domestic ideal: toys and books litter the stairs, echoing the quotidian mess of the kitchen.

Such bodily negotiations and collaborations with the surrounding environment make clear art historical reference to a series of performance photographs by feminist foremother Valie Export. Between 1972 and 1982, Export performed *Körperkonfigurationen*, or *Body Configurations*, in her native Austria.²⁴ Stretching and contorting her body in response to outdoor environments, Export used physical tension to convey inner states of mind. The series of nearly 50 photographs shows Export crouching in a corner, wrapping her body around a column, and extending her body through a gutter. In some of the performances, Export physically mimics architectural fragments or natural environments in ways that push her physical limits. Export underscores that her contorted form expresses not only physical but also psychological or ideological tensions by affixing titles to individual photographs such as “We are prisoners of our own selves.”²⁵ By contrasting her stretched, organic, physical form with civic architecture, she comments on the fraught position of the female body in urban society.²⁶



figure 5 | Jill Miller | *Body Configurations*, 2013

Miller's *Body Configurations* photographs play with Export's state-targeted critiques located in exterior spaces and respond instead to the domestic interior, imparting a collaborative negotiation of challenging power dynamics within a family. In both scenes described above, Miller positions her body as a foundation. She and her son jointly develop and mirror each other's poses, yet his bodily form rises above hers (fig 5). He occupies the dominant space, and perhaps orchestrates the gymnastics required, but also takes on the more precarious poses in which she supports him; the maternal figure is neither in charge nor subservient, but rather joins a partnership with her son in these scenes, where each plays a specific role. Through the implicit physical exertion of the poses, Miller draws attention to the physicality of mothering and, by extension, offers a glimpse into the emotional relationships that are negotiated just below the physical surface.

At the same time, Miller's focus on maternal relations brings an intentional focus to maintenance and care work that is performed within the domestic space. In her 2011 *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Shannon Jackson argues that Bourriaud's championing of artists who produced relational experiences within a museum space turned a blind eye to the institutional structures of invisible domestic labour needed to maintain such works.²⁷ Miller's photographs make explicitly

clear the domestic environment and quotidian clutter, speaking specifically to the maintenance of cooking and cleaning, the oft-unacknowledged daily labour needed to maintain the home. In addition, by stating up front that the *Body Configurations* were performed during a period of intensive homeschooling, Miller further complicates the continuous loop of maintenance labour that Jackson highlights. Personalizing—and politicizing, in a time-honored tradition—the situation to include her role of full-time educator, Miller uses artistic strategies to recode the generic category of maintenance labour as a very specific loop of endless maternal labour of care, domestic maintenance, and education.

An important theme underlying much of the collaborative work produced during this period of homeschooling is the potential for a sustained dialogic relationship, where both Miller and her son are open to being transformed and learning from one another. In a series of *Blind Drawings* that draw on the Surrealists' Exquisite Corpse methods, mother and son agree in advance on subject matter (such as "Pipes Underground") and proceed to create collaborative drawings (fig 6). Sharing a single piece of paper, they begin from opposite edges, but hide their drawings until they meet somewhere in the middle. Each uses half the paper and develops a drawing independently, yet in the final shared outcome, the individual halves are aesthetically influenced by each other. Neither appears dominant; each shares space with the other to create a larger whole. While the drawings themselves may simply share space on the page, however, the process indicates that Miller and her son are themselves open to transformation. They agree on a theme; they work side by side and emphasize mutual investment; neither takes charge and they equalize the field of creating. Such surrendering of artistic autonomy proves problematic for some scholars of relational art. Grant Kester argues that for both Bourriaud and Bishop, artists who share authority with their collaborators risk compromising their aesthetic integrity in favor of political activism.²⁸ For Miller, however, a dialogic approach offers the foundation for a shared aesthetic experience, as well as an implicit feminist maternal intervention that speaks to alternative ways of being.

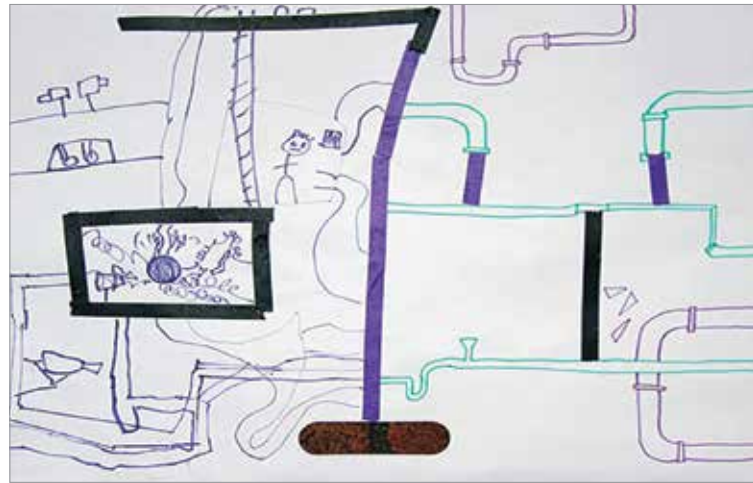


figure 6 | Jill Miller | *Blind Drawing* [“pipes underground” theme], 2013

In promoting a dialogic approach for participatory art in the Anthropocene, Simon Pope proposes the term “entanglement” to radically reorient the relationship between humans and “those things that I used to overlook, use, exploit as landscape, environment, or objects.”²⁹ While Pope is particularly concerned with the dialogic in relation to the more-than-human, Miller offers a model of maternal relational engagement and participation that is equally relevant to a reconsideration of relational existence in the Anthropocene. During this period of intensive homeschooling and artistic collaboration, Miller entangled herself with her child and opened herself up to transformation by accepting a child’s point of view as artistically valid. Not to be confused with sacrificial motherhood, where a child’s needs are always privileged, sometimes at the expense of the mother’s well-being, Miller instead chooses to shift the family dynamic by ceding the total-control method of parenting. She does not subsume her every personal desire to her child’s wishes; rather, she continues to make art but chooses to share the creation process, and in some cases the authorial voice, with a child. Miller’s work here can be read as an example of what renewed and unexpected relations could look like in this new geologic era, reconceived through careful listening and an overturning of long-standing hierarchies. I suggest that her entanglement of mother and child, rather than being

anthropocentric, in fact advances what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa terms “matters of care” by introducing new modes of listening that are critical as we seek to reconsider more-than-human relations.³⁰

As one strategy to accentuate alternate modes of listening, Miller returns to the humor that underscored *The Milk Truck’s* social action. Humor continues through much of Miller’s maternally minded work, drawing pointed attention to long-neglected artistic viewpoints and furthering the focus on family relationships. Miller very intentionally foregrounds her maternal identity as she pushes for art-world models that fit more than a narrow definition, asking “Why are we following the old paradigm of the artist as the sole genius working alone in a studio, childless and married to an art career?”³¹ In addition to working to legitimize maternal experiences as a source for serious art production, however, Miller exploits methods of humor such as satire and word play to emphasize the crucially important but often fraught nature of intimate human relationships. As part of the work created during the homeschooling period, Miller strapped a Go-Pro video camera to her head to capture the mundane, the emotional, and the never-ending nature of daily routines in the home. Months of footage that included fights between siblings and struggles around toilet training prompted Miller to consider the parallels between the parenting of young children and the extreme sporting endeavors that the GoPro video camera is best known to capture. Splicing the family videos in between the company’s promotional videos of extreme sports athletes, and overlaying the scenes with a thumping, high-energy soundtrack appropriated from the GoPro website, Miller satirically positions the frenetic, jarring footage of her life with two young boys as an equally extreme venture. Miller’s *Xtreme*

figure 7 | Jill Miller | *Xtreme Mothering*, 2013





figure 8 | Jill Miller | *Big Balls*, 2013

Mothering!, also featured in *New Maternalisms: Redux*, reframes the maternal-child relationship as an endurance test, humorously opposing a culturally received notion of idyllic motherhood (fig 7). Far from picturing a serene mother with angelic children, Miller offers a sleep-deprived mother, an autistic son, and a marathon of all-consuming, seemingly endless routines of care.

In *Big Balls*, another part of the *Homeschooled* series, Miller continues to deploy strategies of humor as she confronts head-on the difficult nature of relational care work (fig 8). In a daily practice format, Miller documents the “shouting contributions” of each member of her family. Each time a loud sound event occurs, Miller rolls a ball of playdough as a visual record: the longer and louder the sound, the larger the ball of playdough. She assigns a color to each member of the family, and takes a photograph of all playdough balls at the end of the day, visually preserving the sounds of minor slights, tantrums, and family meltdowns for posterity. The title of the work, *Big Balls*, speaks to Miller’s overall approach: the words label the rolled playdough forms but also function as a cultural slang double-entendre for assertiveness described through large testicles. The photographs clearly show which family member had the “biggest balls” on a given day. As the sole female in her family, Miller has no (anatomical) balls but humorously asserts her metaphorical testicular presence through audible ejaculations and playdough forms. At the same time, below the humorous exterior, Miller continues to offer us a probing examination of intimate relationships and a rethinking of relational strategies. Both *Xtreme Mothering!* and *Big Balls* bring to the forefront the often-confrontational experience of parenting young children. Miller does not portray herself as the perfect mother, for we see shouting events assigned to each color of playdough. Rather, Miller turns to humor—conceivably as an in-the-moment survival strategy—and to a meditative process: perhaps in redirecting her attention to rolling the playdough, Miller releases pent-up emotions through the tactile process and thus avoids a reactionary shouting event.

24-Hour Family Portraits, Miller’s performance project developed specifically for the *New Maternalisms: Redux* exhibition, builds on *Big Balls*

to investigate sound expressions, and thus the noise of family relationships, in families other than her own. In this on-going project, she invites participants to join in a creative family portrait based on a sound log that they keep of their family’s sounds over the course of a single day. While *Big Balls* focused more specifically on “shouting events,” the *Family Portraits* sound log encourages participants to consider all manner of sounds—squeaks or bellows, romantic murmurs or angry explosions. Participants not only tabulate the number of significant noises for each member of the family but also rate the level of the noises and describe the events. Just as she did with her own family, Miller then assigns colors to each family member and interprets each sound event in playdough ball form. Miller debuted the work during the opening night of the *New Maternalisms: Redux* exhibition: clothed in a chef’s apron, she worked through sound logs one at a time, rolling balls of playdough for each family’s sound events (fig 9). Following the creation of the requisite number of differently sized balls, Miller performed the role of a portrait photographer, arranging the balls by color in mounds or precarious stacks. With photographer’s lights and printed backgrounds such as one might find in a portrait studio, Miller photographed each “family” on a sunny beach, in a lush forest, the English countryside, or an antique library, based on the recorder’s response to the final question on the sound log.³²

figure 9 | Jill Miller | *24-hour Family Portraits*, performance commissioned for and debuted at *New Maternalisms: Redux*, 2016



While Miller humorously describes the work as a family portrait service in which no one has to do their hair, the more poignant message is an invitation to really listen to the ways in which we interact with our family members and they with us—and, possibly, to reconsider those relations based on a renewed awareness of them. Sound logs submitted to Miller include wide-ranging emotive noises: *Loud wailing. Massive tantrum. Drum practice. Quiet but intense heart-to-heart talk. Singing “Anarchy in UK.” Defending half-packed suitcase.* These sounds of daily life become representations of emotionally charged relationships between parents, children, and siblings. By translating the sound logs into visual form, Miller implicitly asks us to question our ways of relational being. Why are we shouting so much? How do our joyous exclamations differ from our angry outbursts, and which happen more often? Are we communicating effectively with each other, and if not, what might we be missing? Are we listening? Whether or not we choose to listen, sound surrounds us and permeates our relations in a way that other senses do only intermittently, and so sound offers a promising mode of sensory awareness and attunement in anthropocenic explorations. Miller’s reframing of human relation to sound and listening echoes work by creative practitioners such as Pauline Oliveros, whose theories of deep listening and sonic awareness expand definitions of music by focusing careful attention on environmental sounds, or Hildegard Westercamp, whose practice of soundwalking deepens awareness not only of environmental sounds but also of sound-sensory overlaps between human and more-than-human surroundings. By making visible how our own family dynamics play out through sound expressions, Miller invites us to reconfigure our modes of listening, both within our intimate exchanges and, implicitly, in our ways of relational being in the world.

Miller, like other conceptual artists, also pushes us to reconsider the sacredness and necessity of the physical art object in a time of limited resources. *Big Balls* and the *24-Hour Family Portraits* are made not of expensive high art materials but of inexpensive, child-friendly playdough; they do not survive past the end of the day but are recycled and remade anew, again and again. *Body Configurations* exist only as performances and digital files. *The Milk Truck* recycled and repurposed an old ice cream truck; once its life as a breastfeeding emergency support vehicle had

reached its conclusion, Miller again repurposed the truck for a time into an alternative artist residency support vehicle.

Throughout her public and private works of the past five years, Jill Miller has developed a feminist maternal relational focus that may be understood to move us toward new possibilities for a more equitable coexistence among people, objects, and affects. Miller embraces the maternal as a political and ethical orientation, one that Loveless argues “is about attunement, and what it takes to flourish as a responsive ecosystem, now and into the futures.”³³ Offering nuanced understandings of challenging interpersonal relations, Miller often uses humor to drive home larger messages about new ways of being together. At its core, though, Miller’s body of work calls for modes of listening that reframe our understandings of relational existence. *The Milk Truck* offers an artistic platform for thoughtful public conversations around the breastfeeding body, defusing contentious situations in order to facilitate renewed listening across divisive opinions. As she turns her attentions inward in the projects from the *Homeschooled* series, Miller surrenders a singular authorial voice and breaks down traditional power structures to join with her child as artist-collaborator. Such artistic entanglement, much of which revolves around shared communication, necessitates deepened awareness and attentiveness in relational being. In the *24-Hour Family Portraits*, Miller prompts a reassessment of modes of communication within family structures, forcing us to reconsider the place of sound, and thus listening, in our ways of being with each other. Taken as a whole, Miller’s work demands a greater responsiveness in matters of care, a call that could have impact far beyond family and human relations. While she does not model more-than-human relations, it seems to me that Miller’s ways of being and doing relational humanness point us toward a more-than-human, and a more humane, ethics as we seek to navigate this new geologic era. ■

FOOTNOTES

¹ Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer first proposed the term Anthropocene in 2000, naming a new era that characterizes humans as geological agents whose behavior has had such significant global impact as to alter the Earth's geology and ecosystems. Crutzen later identified the Anthropocene as beginning with the Industrial Revolution and described a period of Great Acceleration in impact after 1950, due in large part to the development of disposable plastics and nuclear capabilities, as well as the boom in human population. While the term has been contested in the research community, with some proposing alternate framings such as Capitalocene, in August 2016 the British-led Working Group on the Anthropocene recommended adoption of the term, defined as beginning in 1950, to the International Geological Congress, which is currently weighing the decision. The International Commission on Stratigraphy was to issue a position on the term in 2016 but has yet to do so.

P.J. Crutzen and E.F. Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *Global Change Newsletter*, 41, NO.17 (2000): 17–18.

Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature*, 415 (2002): 23.

J. Zalasiewicz, M. Williams, W. Steffen, and P. Crutzen, "The new world of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Science and Technology*, 44 (2010): 2228–2231.

Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities*, 6 (2015): 159–165.

Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016.

² Natalie Loveless and Sheena Wilson, "Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene," conference program, Edmonton, May 2016.

³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2009).

⁴ Rirkrit Tiravanija is an oft-cited practitioner of relational art. For a 1992 solo show in New York's 303 Gallery, Tiravanija cooked Thai food for visitors in order to facilitate a communal experience among strangers.

⁵ See, for example, Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* (Fall 2004): 51–79.

⁶ Kathryn Brown, ed., *Interactive Contemporary Art: Participation in Practice* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 3.

⁷ Helena Reckitt, "Forgotten Relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics," in *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, exhibition cultures, and curatorial transgressions*, ed. Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2015): 138.

⁸ *Relational Aesthetics*, p.61.

⁹ Loveless, "New Maternalisms Redux: A Critical Curatorial Reflection," 30.

¹⁰ The Kickstarter video and archival materials from *The Milk Truck* project were featured in *New Maternalisms: Redux*.

¹¹ I recently discussed Miller's *Milk Truck* in the context of work by Ashlee Wells Jackson and Jess Dobkin in "Performing the Breastfeeding Body: Lactivism and Art Interventions," *Studies in the Maternal*, special issue on *The Everyday Maternal Practice: Activist Structures in Creative Work*, ed. Elena Marchevska and Valerie Walkerdine, 8 (2), 14 (2016): 1–15. <http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/sim.225/>

¹² Jill Miller, Kickstarter campaign video for *The Milk Truck*, 2011. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/jillmiller/the-milk-truck>

¹³ Miller also asserted that, "Taking a humorous approach has been key in making the conversation happen at all. I just can't imagine *The Milk Truck* garnering as much attention as it did without the 5-foot boob on the roof of the truck. People came close for the spectacle, and they stayed for the conversation." Rachel Epp Buller, "Birthing the American Absurd: Maternal Humour in Contemporary Art," *n.paradoxa: international journal of feminist art*, vol. 36 (July 2015): 53.

¹⁴ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2012), 2.

¹⁵ Shannon Jackson, "Performativity and its Addressee," Walker Art Collection, <http://www.walker-art.org/collections/publications/performativity/performativity-and-its-addressee/>

¹⁶ See, for example, Bill Gilbert, "Modeling Collaborative Practices in the Anthropocene," in *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life*, eds. Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2013): 56–61; Robin Leichenko and Ana Mahecha, "Celebrating geography's place in an inclusive and collaborative Anthro(s)cene," *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 5, NO.3 (2015): 327–32; Eduardo S. Brondizio et al, "Re-conceptualizing the Anthropocene: A call for collaboration," *Global Environmental Change*, 39 (July 2016): 318–327.

¹⁷ Simon Dalby, "Geographic pedagogy in the Anthropocene," in Elizabeth Johnson and Harlan Morehouse, eds., "After the Anthropocene: Politics and geographic inquiry for a new epoch," *Progress in Human Geography*, 38, NO.3 (2014): 444.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 443.

¹⁹ Jessi Lehman and Sarah Nelson, "Experimental politics in the Anthropocene," in Johnson and Morehouse, 447.

²⁰ Simon Pope, "Who Else Takes Part? Admitting the more-than-human into participatory art," PhD diss., St. John's College, University of Oxford, 2015.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ii.

²² Gabriel Deerman suggested the "more humane" as a logical, and even necessary, extension of Pope's thesis during a seminar on "Art after the Anthropocene," Ufer Studios, Berlin, Germany, August 2016.

²³ See: Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin's *Art in the Anthropocene* (Open Humanities Press, 2015) and Eben Kirksey's *The Multispecies Salon* (Duke UP, 2014) for recent examples of this.

²⁴ Miller is not the only artist to take inspiration from Export's series. In 2007, Zambian-born British artist Carey Young performed and photographed a series of eight works titled *Body Techniques*, which make specific reference to Export's *Body Configurations* as well as to several other artists' works from the 1960s and 1970s.

²⁵ Further, when the photographs are exhibited as a group, they sometimes bear the subtitle “the visible externalization of internal states.”

²⁶ Jill Dawsey further argues that the photos offer a critique of authoritarian politics and of conformist behavior in Austria during the postwar period. Jill Christina Dawsey, “The Uses of Sidewalks: Women, Art, and Urban Space, 1966–80,” PhD diss., Stanford University, 2008.

²⁷ Shannon Jackson, like Helena Reckitt, draws heavily on the Maintenance Art of Mierle Laderman Ukeles. *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 46.

²⁸ Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 33. Kester previously wrote about what he termed “dialogical” art practices, focusing heavily on conversational exchange, in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

²⁹ Pope, “Who Else Takes Part?,” 56.

³⁰ Feminist theorist Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues for expanded understandings of care, framing it as a political and ethical obligation for developing relations with, and recognizing the agency of, the more-than-human. See, for example, “Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things,” *Social Studies of Science*, 41, NO.1 (2011): 85–106, and *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2017).

³¹ “Birthing the American Absurd,” 55.

³² Miller also offered “another planet” as an option on the sound log for a family getaway, but that choice appears to have been an uncommon response.

³³ “New Maternalisms: Redux: A Critical Curatorial Reflection,” 29.





DR. RACHEL EPP BULLER maintains a dual critical and creative practice as an art historian and printmaker/book artist. Much of her work addresses intersections of art and the maternal. Her maternally minded scholarship includes *Reconciling Art and Mothering* (2012), *Mothering Mennonite* (2013), and an in-progress book on *Inappropriate Bodies: Art, Design, and Maternity*, as well as many articles and essays. Her recent creative work investigates fictional family narratives, textural references to matrilineal traditions of fine handwork, and letter-writing as an act of relational care. She exhibits and speaks about her work internationally and she is an active curator, with exhibitions curated for the Wichita Art Museum, the Ulrich Museum of Art, the Spencer Museum of Art, Woman-made Gallery Chicago, and, most recently, Das Verborgene Museum in Berlin, which hosted *Alice Lex-Nerlinger, 1893–1975: Fotomonteurin und Malerin/Photomontage Artist and Painter*, the first-ever retrospective of the artist's work. She has received major grants and fellowships from the Fulbright Commission, the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, the Max Kade Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Art Education Foundation. She is a board member of the National Women's Caucus for Art (us), a regional coordinator of The Feminist Art Project, and current Associate Professor of Visual Arts and Design at Bethel College (us). She is the mother of three children, Daniel, Daisy, and Lucy.

JILL MILLER is an art practitioner and professor who works collaboratively with communities and individuals. Her recent art work explores motherhood through a lens of feminism and performance. In the past she has searched for Bigfoot in the Sierra Nevada, inserted herself into the art historical work of John Baldessari, and become a private investigator surveilling art collectors. Her largest scale community engagement project, *The Milk Truck*, reached tens of thousands of people around the world through social media. Born in Illinois, she received her MFA in from University of California, Los Angeles and her BA from University of California, Berkeley, in English. Her work has been shown nationally and internationally, and collected in public institutions worldwide including CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo in Madrid and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington DC. She also received an Individual Engagement Grant from the Wikimedia Foundation for her socially-engaged project, Women of Wikipedia (wow!) Editing Group that empowers high school-aged women to close the gender gap by researching and editing Wikipedia articles. She currently teaches art and public practices at University of California Berkeley and Stanford University. She is the mother of two boys, Paxton and Argo.



BEING
OF THE **BREAST**

Irina Aristarkhova on Jess Dobkin's *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar*



BEING OF THE BREAST

Irina Aristarkhova on Jess Dobkin's *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar*

I enter the gallery. It is the opening reception of the group exhibition *New Maternalisms: Redux* curated by Natalie Loveless.¹ Art projects are mostly installed downstairs. A large triangular room is parted in several sections. At the end of my exploration a section is occupied by Jess Dobkin's project titled *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* (abbreviated here as *The Lactation Station* or *Breast Milk Bar*). On the left there is an exhibition poster with a description of the project and a light-box. On the opposite wall there is a mounted television screen (**fig 1** opposite). *The Lactation Station* was shown and performed for the first time in 2006 in Toronto, Canada; what I witness is the third iteration.²

There are two large red soft chairs next to the television screen, a white round coffee table and two bowls filled with Cheerios by General Mills on top of it, all set up for comfortable viewing or conversation (**fig 2**). Interviews with the five mothers who donated their breast milk are looped on the screen. There is another description, an artist statement, next to the screen that focuses on mothers in the video, thanking them for their donation to the project. At the back of this room there is a large group of people. When I approach closer, I see they surround a table where Jess Dobkin has prepared a set for her *Breast Milk Bar*. Her assistant is Brittany Ball-Snellen, at the time of the exhibition a second-year master's student in art history at the University of Alberta (**fig 3** see page 17). Snellen and Dobkin wear light pink tops, with Dobkin, as she did in 2006, wearing a 'smart casual' shirt with light stripes. She wears red lipstick, made up to serve as a bar hostess. Her outfit is just right for the occasion, as it does not push the bar reference too far towards sexualization of the scene. This would be inappropriate to the message, perhaps, of prompting "a conversation about cultural taste and taboo."³ The focus is on the product: breast milk and its tasting (**fig 4** see page 18).

The place of the performance proper consists of three tables covered in white cloth. The larger, semi-circular, table in front is used by Dobkin to serve audience members. It is this taller table, with four high bar stools, half white half silver, that makes this arrangement reminiscent of a bar (**fig 5**; in the original 2006 version they were also white). The crisp white tablecloth and crisp light pink shirts (on Dobkin and her assistant) create





figure 2 | Jess Dobkin | *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar*, 2016

a sense of cleanliness, while the two other tables (gallery plinths repurposed, one assumes) are for supplies.

There is a lot to say about aesthetic connotations here: the whiteness of the tablecloth and gallery; the hip contemporary bar; hygiene, cleanliness, and purity; goodness and safety, all these assumptions of whiteness which have been translated by Dobkin into her bar ecology.⁴ Today the aesthetic of whiteness in bars is associated with young affluent customers, who expect whiteness in the seamless geography between bars in “newer” airport lounges, in “newer” contemporary hotels, and in apartments around the world, often mimicking a “Sobe” (Miami) style of effortless, glamor, and youth, or evoking a more Japanese-inspired (and no less affluent) connotation of simplicity and minimalism. Dobkin’s bar aesthetic is closer to these high-class aspirations than to dingy, dark leather, smoke-filled bars where serving breast milk would

signal a peculiar male desire. Thus, Dobkin’s *Breast Milk Bar* whitewashes our intentions with white stools, cloth, gallery walls, and milk itself, with all the problematic assumptions about race, class, and sexuality that this still-acceptable-in-this-era verb (*whitewashing*) entails on multiple levels. Even the white walls of the gallery are co-opted into Dobkin’s bar ecology, becoming part of a larger narrative of the “good” milk tasting versus a more “creepy” one.

Objects on the table include china and serving silverware, which an audience member can inquire about when sitting at the table for tasting, as these are conversation pieces related to milk donors and other stories surrounding the process of donation.⁵ There are also Cheerios (recurring throughout the installation) in silver bowls and a photograph of Dobkin with her infant daughter, in a black and white cow-skin patterned frame (figs 7 & 8). Cheerios are served with milk and, just like the hip whiteness, they steer us to think towards this “good,” innocent underpinning of tasting the breast milk.⁶ After all, Dobkin seems to imply tongue-in-cheek, we all consumed this in our childhood—a breakfast bowl of cereal. (A personal confession: this one was a learning curve for me as someone whose non-Western childhood was Cheerios-free).

The tables behind the main serving area are supply stations: a cooler with milk containers, each identified by their names; pipettes and plastic cups with name tags, from which identified milk will be poured into tasting cups; menu stacks with milk titles; white paper towels; silver serving plates; a large Cheerios box; and a journal with names of those who signed up for tasting and other notes (fig 9).

figure 5 | Jess Dobkin | *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar*, 2016





figures 7 & 8 | Jess Dobkin | *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* (details), 2016

The installation, the space that its objects and materials create, is part of the overall theme of the *performance of tasting*. A taster signs up in advance or comes up to a free seat, sits at the table of this *Breast Milk Bar*, and is given a menu. The options on *Tasting Menu May 12, 2016* were: *Superpower Substance*, *The Very First Treaty*, *Jus de Vivre*, *Finest Fast Food*, *Nature 'n' Nurture*. Through naming, the substance becomes a part of public culture. I am not implying that it wasn't already — since mothers are not part of “pure nature” — but what interests me here is Dobkin's aesthetic strategy and methods of transforming it, within the context of this specific work, into a cultural artifact, a product of art. These titles for the breast milk are one strategy for placing those who recognize them, who read and ponder over selecting one of them, in dialogue with breastfeeding persons, who can potentially view themselves through their bodily fluid seen now not as a natural product but as a cultural artifact.⁷ Here, Dobkin provides, very consciously, a method (notice I do not claim this as *the* method) of such cultural exchange. These names claim power: life-giving food, contemplation, magic, sociality itself. *Tasting Menu May 2012*, an earlier performance in Montreal, had *Mother Knows Breast*, *Blue Gold*, *Tapped Sustenance*, *Natural Wonder*, *Sweet Season's Blessings*, *Potent Double Passion*, *Mighty Immunity Elixir*. Connection between mind and body, heaven and earth, life and death: the names claim it all, gracefully, with humor.

After a bar participant has a discussion around their menu choices, Snellen then assists Dobkin, the hostess, in identifying the correct vessel and pouring that specific milk into a tasting cup. Then, Dobkin

serves the bar customer with the gestures of a wine, coffee, or tea tasting ritual. **Figure 10** shows how the artist is attentive to the product at hand, chatty and conversational, as a good, well-trained hostess would be, with a focus on the product of tasting. You can almost hear her asking what her customers think, inviting their opinions and reactions. They are not here to get drunk or because they are hungry, they are here to get an *experience*. After all, they are invited to “quench their curiosity.”⁸ The attention to the product is remarkable. The centrality of the maternal body and breast milk as its product is carried through in the performance just as it is in the installation that includes video interviews with donors. Dobkin remains open and non-judgmental towards her tasters, once again keeping to the “perfect hostess” role, emphasizing in her writing the diversity of her customers and how each one is included:

It was about the donors' stories but also about the stories of the audience/participants. I wanted to know their stories. I was less concerned with whether or not people tasted the milk, but rather their reasons for either choosing to taste or to abstain.... One person shared his vast and varied experience of tasting women's breast milk. Penny Van Esterik, a nutritional anthropologist who studied breastfeeding for years and became a powerful resource and consultant to the project, discussed at the performance her own personal experience of breastfeeding two children and never having tasted her own breast milk.⁹

Whenever an occasion made it possible, Dobkin also promoted conversations between breast milk donors and tasters, if, that is, a donor happened to be near the table and was willing and interested in revealing their identity. Thus, Dobkin continued her role as facilitator of this groundbreaking socio-cultural recognition of the breastfeeding person in public, seeing herself as an “intermediary.”¹⁰ Though Dobkin writes about this experience as “transgression,” this specific term was not what came to my mind when I observed the audience and the performance. Transgression was certainly a theme in the 2006 Toronto iteration of the work, but in Edmonton the context was different (I discuss this further below). Take one example: four audience members considering their milk selection. **Figure 11** shows Dobkin serving them

their selection. Then on **figure 12** you can see one woman looking into the camera, smiling, as the one next to her tastes the milk. There is no tension around the room — at least, I did not feel any. If anything, there is a calm and even festive, atmosphere. Next — and here please stay with my interpretive leap of imagination, as I am going to potentially over-read this — the same woman who just tasted the milk is looking at her — daughter? — tasting another person’s breast milk. What is going on in her mind? How does a mother of an adult daughter feel when she is tasting another woman’s breast milk? This is the taste she probably will remember, although she does not (and cannot) remember her own mother’s breast milk, provided that she was breastfed by her mother in the first place. There is this moment between them, a very intimate moment, that Michael J.H. Woolley captured on film and that Dobkin and donors enabled. That specific place, that moment, was shared by mothers, daughters, non-mothers, and non-daughters.

I consider various elements of this work as aesthetic strategies developed by Dobkin towards the empowerment of mothers and resistance to how culture defines worth and value in breastfeeding. It would be a mistake, I would argue here, to over-determine and re-fetishize the physicality of breast milk itself at the expense of the symbolic power that Dobkin channels in this work. The artist finds a form to sustain this difficult complexity, but also emphasizes the simple inevitability of nature as culture and culture as nature by insisting on acknowledging the symbolic power of language and representation. Mothers, who have not had a chance, historically, to participate in naming communal values, having been excluded from decision-making in their communities by governmental structures comprised of spiritual or actual fathers, now

figure 9 | Jess Dobkin | *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* (detail), 2016



figure 10 | Jess Dobkin | *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* (detail), 2016

redefine, in their own voice and image, what their milk and their breastfeeding is to them, in addition to, outside of, and in place of someone else’s words and images (of breastfeeding Madonnas, for example).

The self-recognition of the people who donated their milk, and the pact (a new contract?) of its giving, are exemplified by Dobkin’s explicit intention to recognize the mother.¹¹ The quiet power of recognition and self-recognition in this work evokes various debates happening around life and how it is defined, and Dobkin participates in these debates by bringing others into them.¹²

The Lactation Station has generated a variety of engaged and important scholarly and art critical responses.¹³ Many of these responses directly address the question of taste: an all-important question of tasting breast



figure 11 | Jess Dobkin | *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* (detail), 2016

milk, as if one were at a bar, and responding to it within the parameters of tasting. Embodied and theoretical reactions often evoke the notion of the “abject” and “disgust” in relation to the bodily fluids of the queer single mother.¹⁴

Penny Van Esterik wrote a detailed account of her experience of the performance, and subsequently situated Dobkin’s work within this wider context of Mary Douglas’s notion of “disgust.” Particularly in a North American context, breast milk stands next to urine as “something best done in a bathroom.” Van Esterik explains further: “This is especially true for those who grew up without the experience of seeing a mother breastfeeding her child. Urination is an inappropriate and insulting analogy, meant to humiliate women and devalue the production of this precious fluid.”¹⁵ It is an effective strategy, given that women also have to use bathrooms to urinate. Here the analogy is to fluids (hence, I assume, why Van Esterik did not use feces). Whatever one does in a bathroom, the point is that it is a space that is both private but also left to “abject” activities, such as urination and defecation. Placing breast milk on the same level might look like providing the breastfeeding person privacy and “safe space,” but actually, this space is mostly private because of socially and culturally rejected fluids. We are not expected to drink and

eat in a bathroom. This would be considered inappropriate. Then why are bathrooms the only place left for breastfeeding persons to go to pump their milk or breastfeed?

Breastfeeding has been surrounded with disgust, which *The Lactation Station* reveals: “Perhaps the most successful aspect of the show was its ability to bring to light the intense revulsion that surrounds breast milk, a substance that is inextricably linked to the feminine body.”¹⁶ I would certainly agree with the latter explanation, that revulsion comes into play here. Furthermore, this revulsion is not so automatic, as in, just because it comes from a feminine body, it is disgusting. I would argue instead that the logic of revulsion comes into play because the breast milk is coming from articulate, speaking, writing, creating, self-determining, and self-assertive “bodies,” which might or might not identify as feminine, but which are life-giving. The logic of revulsion does not come into play in the case of cow milk. There is almost a strange disconnection here: would it not be more repulsive to taste the milk coming

figure 12 | Jess Dobkin | *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* (detail), 2016



from the udders or breasts of non-human animals, to do a cross-species tasting? But it does not play out like this in most cultures. This is to show that this revulsion has no “natural” basis behind it, as Douglas asserted in her work on disgust and bodily fluids. I can imagine another work, post-*Lactation Station*, where packaged breast milk is advertised and sold in supermarkets as superior, healthier, and more “natural” than any other animal milk, because it is human, of the same species. But would that be a kind of cannibalism?¹⁷

I am not asking these questions for the sake of being outrageous, but rather, to move the discussion of “disgust” into the recent scholarly literature on what it means to “eat well.” Derrida proposes that we cannot ever eat well – that is, ethically – because this would mean cannibalism, eating just ourselves, and not consuming “others”: non-human animals. Eating is appropriation and consumption. In his discussion of vegetarianism, he (rather quickly, too quickly) moves to this point: that appropriating plants is also appropriating life. But because he forgets the mother, he does not raise the point asserted by Irigaray, among others: the mother is consumed, literally, and then culturally.¹⁸ As much as we try to move away from cannibalism, we all start as cannibals, as someone who eats our mother. This is the powerful message of Dobkin’s work: the mothers are citizens, writers, artists, thinkers, and... “food.” This is the publicity Dobkin so brilliantly constructs, creates, and exploits, with its many agential, material, forms: articulating, pondering, doing, thinking about breastfeeding by those who’ve done it and not. Van Esterik concludes that “Dobkin’s performance forces us to confront the judgmental, suspicious gaze that we project on women’s bodies, particularly the bodies of breastfeeding women.”¹⁹

This “gaze” does not need to be so suspicious and judgmental. But it still is. I would suggest it is that way not only because of the larger structural setting in which “breastfeeding” and “urination” are given the same space and hence, meaning. It is because, largely, we still do not have vocabulary, we still have not “processed,” culturally, politically, economically, socially, what it means, to start our lives as “Beings of the Breast.”²⁰ There has been much more investment in living lives “toward

death,” as “already-been-born,” but not enough in “coming-from-others.” There has been an effort, however, on the part of a few feminist scholars, artists, and activists, to devote more time and effort to this other dimension of human condition. Mothers here still serve in the role of the Other, but at least there is an acknowledgement that we are born from someone and haven’t just appeared in the shape and form of a thinking and making subject. The Father has been, certainly, a much more present figure, both literally and figuratively, as someone who speaks, writes, creates, *who is*.²¹

When it comes to artist and scholar mothers there are not many pre-existing models on which to build. Mothers, as I’ve shown elsewhere, often become part of a *metaphor* of the mother, of *representation*, and once they’ve become that, it is hard for a metaphor of the mother to accommodate an actual, breathing, creating, writing, person.²² Madonna and her representations are a case in point in Western art history. Mike Strobel, the Toronto Sun journalist who wrote an infamous “disgusting” review of *The Lactation Station* when it first premiered in 2006, did not need to reach out to all those *Madonnas* when he was confronted with Dobkin’s work: they were assumed as great works of art, by great (male) artists about breastfeeding.²³ This art historical background, with its specific model of motherhood, has been well studied as exclusionary to mothers themselves, who did not participate in constructing this image of “perfect motherhood.”²⁴ Long before Dobkin’s performance took place in Toronto, it had already become a “controversial” work of art. It was almost banned on grounds of public health. However, when Mike Strobel titled his review of the performance “Lactation Smacktation. A Phlegm-Filled Fluids Fest – Complete with Boogers ‘n’ Mash and Eye Gunk Pies – Is a Much Better Idea” (2006), he also joined a long tradition by mainstream media and the art world of devaluing feminist and queer artists through mockery and condescension.²⁵

Here I am reminded of another attempt to devalue a feminist artwork, as historically the work of Jess Dobkin is situated within a relatively young history of feminist performance art. It is important to ask how aesthetic judgment is produced within contemporary art history, with its prefer-

ence for some works rather than others. My other example is one of the most iconic cases—Judy Chicago’s and Miriam Shapiro’s Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts, with its famous collaborative project *Womanhouse*. Similar to *The Lactation Station*, *Womanhouse* included several works of performance and installation art directly dealing with women’s bodily fluids. The exhibition, visited by ten thousand visitors over the period of one month (January 30 to February 28, 1972), garnered wide national press, television network coverage, and generated at least two documentary films, but it inspired just a few short paragraphs by the then-senior art writer for the *LA Times*, William Wilson. His general tone was meant to dismiss and destroy, reminiscent of Strobel’s tone in relation to Dobkin’s work in 2006:

*An art-environment project called ‘Womanhouse’ is as cheerful and disarming as a pack of laughing schoolgirls under a porcelain sky... Womanhouse celebrates the fact and the fantasy of being a woman... We are made to understand that women, simply in their being, are creative. Their houses, meals and children represent art out of masculine reach.*²⁶

In trying to be dismissive, to practice the ability to ignore and downplay, Wilson and Strobel did not fail to demonstrate their own lack of critical rigor. Indeed, a minimal knowledge of the Western canon of art history brings to mind numerous examples of male artists making work about their “houses, meals and children,” not to mention, once again, the Western tradition of Madonna and Child imagery. “The fact and fantasy of being a woman” seems to surprise, even astonish, the writer, as if he had never encountered it before. However, let us not negate or dismiss critical anger. To respond to a specific work about a woman’s bodily fluid—for example, menstruation, in Judy Chicago’s *Menstruation Bathroom*—Wilson employed neither aesthetic nor art historical tools, but only a recourse to gender, as he claims that “any man” would feel a “somber sense of respect” upon seeing this “heaviest project on view.” In the *Womanhouse* film, a group of men in suits is asked about their reaction to the *Menstruation Bathroom*. One of them says: “She really had a mess on her hands.... I took it literally, without interpretation:

she either had a huge body, or a lot of menstruating friends. But obviously, this is on the literal level. Maybe, on the symbolic level, it was a way of saying something else... Particularly in the context of the whole house. As I said earlier, a lot of the house is amusing. And this is not amusing.”²⁷ An interview immediately following the men in suits shows a young man holding a child and talking about how the house and the person who lives in the house are in conflict, and that is what *Womanhouse* represented for him. A “lay person” seems to have a more nuanced reading than a paid critic.²⁸

Wilson and Strobel, who are neither able to focus on the aesthetics of the works because of their identity politics and personal attitudes nor capable of being topically critical of them and thus showing them some respect, transfer their anger elsewhere: onto the current art world and feminist community. On the same page in *The Los Angeles Times*, Wilson includes another exhibition review by two artists—Connie Zehr and Lynn Bassler—who had nothing to do with the *Womanhouse* exhibition. The two different reviews are under the same title, *Lair of Female Creativity*, as if they are about the same thing. “Lair,” a word that evokes animality and secrecy, distances its reader from female creativity, but also, as a strong word in a short text, represents a panic in the art world. The second review discusses two artists who happened to be women, and, as if the gender of the artists in question was the most relevant characteristic of their work, Wilson grouped them together to put forward an argument: “Current history has put us in a place where formal inventiveness has slowed to a trickle.”²⁹ In way that is very similar to the responses to Dobkin’s performance, there is a charge that feminist art about women’s bodily fluids represents a decline in art and creativity in general. It is feminists, queers, and other minorities whose work is usually presented as a canary of this decline.

We could laugh at such critics, if they were not part of a much more disturbing—because of its proclivity to censor—power structure. When it first came out in 2006, Strobel’s article was linked to a blog run by a Canadian self-proclaimed conservative artist.³⁰ There, in response to Dobkin’s work, calls have been made not only to defund the work

because it does not represent “traditional motherhood,” but also, to lobby local governments to change laws such that lesbian, queer, and single mothers would not be given financial assistance, or – ideally – not be able to become parents at all. References have been made to other self-defined “conservative” publications that connected Dobkin’s work to other artists who used bodily fluids and were severely censored in what is known as the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) Four.³¹ Ironically, Holly Hughes, one of NEA Four members, who had to defend herself against charges of pedophilia because of her openly lesbian performance personae, was one of Jess Dobkin’s mentors at the *Wow Café Theatre* in New York in the late 1990s.³² Thus, reception to work such as *The Lactation Station*, both in its scholarly acclaim and critical outrage, needs to be understood within the larger context of struggle over recognition, redistribution, and representation of queer maternal bodies. What we are dealing with here is a departure from the canon.

Womanhouse and the *Wow Café Theatre* have changed the canon and opened new ways of being, with the desire to overcome a patriarchal, heterosexist regime, in theory and in creative practice. Adrienne Rich proposed her vision of the “lesbian continuum,” Audre Lorde famously cautioned white middle class feminists not to focus their struggles too narrowly on white men and the mainstream and turn instead to finding more solidarities with and distributing more power to other oppressed groups, such as queer persons of color.³³ *The Lactation Station* is part now of this ongoing transformation. I do not see these histories as competing for one true way of resistance and social or cultural transformation. I see these discussions as ongoing experimentation with many potential and already existing paths of transformation.³⁴

This generative approach was demonstrated by the events surrounding *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* performance at the FAB Gallery, the University of Alberta, Edmonton. The event was a testimony to a profound, thoughtful, agential, and collaborative transformation. Imagine a confluence of governmental, academic, administrative, critical, creative, scholarly, and personal factors to produce this outcome.

Actually, two outcomes: the exhibition, titled *New Materialisms: Redux* (May 12 – June 4, 2016), and a colloquium titled “Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene” (May 11 – 14, 2016), during which I had an opportunity to interact with Jess Dobkin as another participant in the colloquium, facilitating a deeper understanding of her writing and creative work.

Natalie S. Loveless and Sheena Wilson, who organized the events of the week, made that time seem like a feminist utopia of post-patriarchy: differences between persons, scholars, and artists were acknowledged and not silenced; mind and body were in harmony with each other by giving them an equal amount of time and resources; mothers, fathers, non-mothers, and non-fathers were welcomed into theory and practice; institutional support was provided, visible to and appreciative of organizers and curators; local community welcomed the event, with excellent press and publicity, thoughtful, critical, and not at all hateful; ³⁵ the Minister of Status of Women, Honorable Stephanie McLean, who was a guest of honor at the opening of the exhibition, happened to be breast-feeding too (fig 13). Loveless and Wilson steered conversations and crowds, and made sure that everyone was fed and taken care of, important for all these unemployed or underemployed artists-scholars-mothers-participants. Even the colloquium keynote, a groundbreaking feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, did not just fly in for an afternoon, but generously participated in the four-day colloquium, culminating in her keynote lecture, now available online (fig 14).³⁶

figure 13 | The Honorable Stephanie McLean, Minister of Status of Women (Alberta)





figure 14 | Groundbreaking feminist art historian Griselda Pollock (centre)

If in Toronto, in 2006, the *Lactation Station* was conceived by Dobkin, perceived by the art world, and received by the larger public as a *transgression*, this time in Edmonton the context was completely different. Dobkin was only one of the artists, and most works were devoted to similar topics of cultural (mis)recognition and the production of the maternal. I wonder now how Dobkin felt about it? Often artists are advised to fear normalization and assimilation no less than push back, defunding, and censorship. There is a danger in becoming the norm. But here, Loveless, the curator, showed us that multiple works, next to each other, offer an excellent path for examining and considering complexity and nuance.³⁷ In Edmonton in 2016, the *Lactation Station* performed as a profound, carefully thought through work, without examples of the knee-jerk reaction it encountered in a less welcoming context of vintage Toronto 2006. To a large extent, I believe, it is due to the community-

building work that Loveless and her collaborators have accomplished over the years. In my interview with Loveless, she recounted her prior interest in the *Lactation Station*, and her involvement in the preparation of the performance:

*We started the conversation months ahead of time. It involved reaching out to all kinds of communities. Some women who donated are women from the university community: feminist mothers of young children. ... I sent emails to the feminist community on campus. Many questions, concerns, anxieties, were raised, and I was a focal point of that conversation. [Dobkin then] came out earlier in February to do interviews with final donors. Through participating in this way, my initial feminist academic ecology shifted in new directions.*³⁸

A new sign of this change is making breastfeeding a practice of maternal citizenship, and co-creating breast milk as a cultural artifact. This is a precarious step, however. Sharing one's own breast milk on campus is not exactly like sharing apples from one's own garden. The status of the mother is still riddled with contradictions, and it is especially courageous for mothers to represent themselves as "breasted beings" for others, as "beings of the breast."³⁹ This notion of embodied intimacy came through especially in Loveless's observation on how delicate the context of this performance was in a small community of the University of Alberta:

*[Donors'] experiences of breastfeeding were potentially made public to their students. Here [The Lactation Station] was really a local portrait. It felt very intimate to me, the request I made of people to do it. That was also my experience of participating in the work... When I came up at the very end to participate in the tasting, one milk reminded me of my own milk, it tasted sweet. Another one tasted sour. It made me feel cautious. I did not know who was watching me: I did not want to offend anyone by my reaction... In the end, I was very pleased with the event. How people talked. A lot of debate. Some people were hanging around the piece, unwilling to participate by tasting the milk. They participated by thinking about their own unwillingness!*⁴⁰

Thus, the context that I experienced was not an accident. A lot of excellent, groundbreaking, transformational work had been done by

Loveless, Wilson, and their local collaborators. Prior to the exhibition and the colloquium, their students had spent four months reading texts and discussing art works by the visiting artists and scholars, in preparation for our discussions with students and colleagues in Edmonton.⁴¹ Finally, we could have a conversation going beyond the usual dichotomies and culture wars, a thick and detailed conversation. Even if it was just a moment, these events created an intellectual and creative community open to a multiplicity of maternal and non-maternal encounters, persons, and productions. “We moved on,” I thought in that moment, “from the vocabulary of transgression to consideration of ourselves as *beings of the breast*.”

Where do cracks appear in the fragile balance between humorous lightness and the underlying lessons of the work? After all, no amount of whitewashing and cheering us up with Cheerios covers Dobkin’s own ambivalence about the topic, shown in the intention, research, installation, and performance. Dobkin’s assertion that “(T)here is nothing inherently controversial about the natural function of breastfeeding,” if we just did not have these “cultural norms and the deeper fear of the power of women’s bodies, the psychic fear of women, with bodies able to grow, birth, and feed their young,”⁴² is supported but also challenged by the work itself. She acknowledges the tremendous pressure on mothers, who can never live up to the perfect image of motherhood coming from the discourses and institutions of medical, religious, social, economic, and creative professions. Dobkin writes that, ironically, just as breastfeeding has become a desired and promoted practice, especially among white middle class women often presumed to be stay-at-home mothers in heterosexual relationships, the same community looks down on women who do not breastfeed: “After giving birth to my daughter, I soon discovered that a different kind of discomfort can be found in bottle feeding. Where I would have been quite shameless about breastfeeding in public, I felt apologetic nursing with a bottle in the open.”⁴³ Feminist mothers, thus, must ponder whether this co-option of breastfeeding as the “right thing to do” and “in the baby’s best interest” by patriarchal society leads to unwelcome self-policing.

Moreover, Dobkin’s level of guilt and disappointment at not being able to breastfeed her daughter is (intentionally?) disturbing. What disturbs me about this is how easily we all seem to accept such feelings on behalf of mothers as “of course, it must be terrible not to be able to breastfeed.” Does this work itself get co-opted in the policing of breastfeeding as the “only right thing to do”? I do not want to seem like “catching” Dobkin when she uses this notion of the “natural function of breastfeeding” to make a very different, critical, point. Rather, what I am stressing here is that this work demonstrates how implicated mothers and audiences are in conversations about what is good and bad for a baby, often forgetting the mother altogether.

Dobkin is walking a tightrope here to celebrate breastfeeding as a feminist artist, anew, without collapsing into this tremendous societal pressure on mothers to be perfect for their babies, and also without making a fetish out of breast milk (a curiosity item) and thus exploiting donating mothers and their breast milk for her own artistic career. What is particularly valuable about this work, and a great contribution to the feminist art of and from the maternal, is how it shows cracks, ambivalences, and collapses between those various elements, and makes failures seem less important: it is alright for Dobkin if someone uses donated milk as a fetish; it is not her intention, but it is an important part of the conversation; Dobkin is clear that this work will stir emotions, and uses her own vulnerability to potentially let other mothers feel welcomed and represented culturally, publicly. I especially applaud Dobkin’s talent in and commitment to taking up such difficult topics for feminist performance art, where “feel good” performances related to women as mothers are often met with caution, not to mention the ambivalence about motherhood in the early lesbian performance art community.⁴⁴ Dobkin fully acknowledged this danger of being co-opted by the assumptions of the traditional family structure, presumed in North America as following the norms of Christian, heterosexual, white middle-class family. In the *Lactation Station*, queer mothering becomes an integral part of contemporary art, adding to other famous representations, such as Catherine Opie’s photograph *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004).⁴⁵



FAB Gallery | New Maternalisms: Redux opening reception, 2016

Ambivalent references are also made to maternal sexuality in relation to breast feeding. As I discussed in the beginning of this essay, Dobkin frames the tasting experience as hip but somewhat de-sexualized. She seems to acknowledge the connection between potential pleasure and breast feeding, including sexual pleasure, but does not want to sensationalize it in an exploitative and fetishistic manner.⁴⁶ Certainly, this ambivalence rests on other ways in which maternal sexual pleasure is downplayed as a by-product at best and threatening at worst, even as a *potential*.

Finally, a topic that can be only briefly mentioned here, is the ambivalence between human and non-human. After all, my first encounter with Jess Dobkin's work was at *Animal Acts Festival* in Ann Arbor, where she performed *Everything I've Got* and *Being Green*.⁴⁷ In the *Lactation Station* the question of the non-human is not on the surface, but it was often

raised in conversations during the colloquium, itself subtitled *Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene*. The small framed picture of Dobkin, immortalizing her unhappiness and disappointment at not being able to breastfeed her daughter (fig 8), is part of *The Lactation Station*. Its white and black cow-skin pattern is a testament, albeit indirectly, to this very difficult but important question of non-human milk and its role in human survival. As Dobkin herself stated,

*I used it for a bit of humor – and that everything on the bar counter might be a prompt for conversation – in this case, to give a nod to our sister species whose milk we drink on the regular basis without much attention to the politics and ethics of the practice. (Of course acknowledging that many people do consider the choice of drinking the milk of other species, but in general, it isn't questioned.) So there's an irony in the social taboo of drinking human milk and human breastfeeding, but drinking the milk of other species is normalized. And in all that, I like the idea of the "framing" my photo of trying to feed Yael with this conversation. (Kind of a pun on the "frame.")*⁴⁸

Some artworks are generative. The moment one experiences them, one's mind starts racing, emotions rush in and force one to regroup. One reacts to one's own reaction, judging oneself, evaluating one's aesthetic judgment as an ethical one. Later possibilities of interpretation, conversation, and memory itself come in, formed by those emotions and images. *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* is one such generative work. What is this work about? *Who* is this work about? It is about all of us as *being(s) of the breast*. And it is an invitation to a conversation about breast milk as a cultural artifact and maternal product through aesthetics: senses and memories of touch, smell, sight, voice, and, of course, taste. ■

FOOTNOTES

¹ <http://newmaternalisms.com/2016-exhibition-overview>. Last accessed March 10, 2017.

² http://www.jessdobkin.com/jd_work/the-lactation-station. Last accessed March 10, 2017.

³ *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* poster (fig 6). In 2006 a different portrait of the naked Dobkin (see the link in footnote 2, above) “squeezing” her breast to fill a wine glass presents us with a much more sexualized maternal imagery than the one I witnessed in the third iteration of the performance in Edmonton. I come back to the question of maternal sexuality at the end of this text.

⁴ This is an intentional strategy, as Dobkin uses phrases “sleek lounge,” “audience ... were greeted by maître d’,” and “in the spirit of wine tasting I performed as sommelier,” (p.68) to describe the setup of the performance, in Jess Dobkin “Performing with Mother’s Milk: *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar*,” in *Intimacy Across Visceral and Digital Performance*, Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan, eds., (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 62–73.

⁵ *Ibid.* Donating mothers suggested these vessels for their milk. In the exhibition they served as another prompt for conversation and not for serving milk to the audience.

⁶ Dobkin also used them to “cleanse the palette” between various types of milk. (Personal Correspondence, March 2017).

⁷ The naming itself was done by Dobkin, and I wonder what the donors thought about their names, how giving them an opportunity to name would change the dynamic of the work and the level of their participation. The act of naming itself however is what enables this further pondering and consideration.

⁸ The Lactation Station poster and other promotional materials.

⁹ Jess Dobkin, “Performing with Mother’s Milk,” 71.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹ Here I allude to an ongoing feminist debate, based on the work of Nancy Fraser, among others, around the significance and primacy of recognition, redistribution, and representation as strategies of social, economic, and cultural change. I align myself here with critics of economic determinism, and claim that the process of recognition—here, of donors who choose to participate in Dobkin’s *Lactation Station* by providing their breast milk—has to start with self-determination; otherwise the recognition (by the audience, for example), no matter how “progressive” the intentions might be, risks being only an *imagined* recognition as benevolence or charity. That is why Dobkin’s careful strategy of recognition through self-recognition is so important for me here: tasting menu names, videos with maternal interviews, and the donors themselves (if they choose so, if they decide to, if they can) welcomed and acknowledged at the performance to observe and participate.

¹² I would like to point out again that I do not suggest here that mothers’ breast milk was “natural” before Dobkin named it and made it “cultural.” Mothers, just like any other human being, are implicated in our notions of nature/culture, as they are born into those definitions as well. (After all, vines do not name wines for tasting menus.) There is another question which does not concern me in this essay, but which nevertheless is important to point towards: the one of trust in the authenticity of the breast milk. That is, trust between Dobkin and her audience that, indeed, what we are offered is breast milk, and between Dobkin and her donors, that their breast milk is being served,



figure 6 | Jess Dobkin | *The Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* poster, 2006

or that it is their breast milk when they donated it, and trust in the care that Dobkin and her collaborators will demonstrate in dealing with the milk and tracking it by donor.

¹³ Roberta Mock, “It Turns Out: Jess Dobkin’s Puppet Body,” in *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women*, Johanna Householder and Tanya Mars, eds. (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2006); Charles Reeve, “The Kindness of Human Milk,” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies*, 9:1, Winter 2009, 66–73; Stephanie Springgay, “*The Lactation Station* and A Feminist Pedagogy of Touch,” *n. paradoxa* 26 (2010), 59–65; Penny Van Esterik, “Vintage Breast Milk: Exploring the Discursive Limits of Feminine Fluids,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 137, “Performance Art,” Laura Levin, ed., (Winter 2009), 20–23.

¹⁴ Van Esterik, 2009; Springgay, 2010.

¹⁵ Van Esterik, 2009, 22.

¹⁶ Van Esterik, 23.

¹⁷ Jennie Klein also references cannibalism in relation to the *Lactation Station* in her review of the exhibition, “Review of New Maternalisms: Redux,” *Studies in the Maternal*, 8(2): 22, (2016), 7.

¹⁸ For a comprehensive bibliography, see Irina Aristarkhova, *Hospitality of the Matrix: Philosophy, Biomedicine, and Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Van Esterik, 23.

²⁰ Here I am developing the notion of *Being of the Breast* from a Russian word for the infant, *grudnichok*, literally meaning a nursing/“breasted,” baby. *Being* plays on the ability of the word to be a gerund, a present participle, and a noun.

²¹ Aristarkhova, 2012; www.newmaternalisms.com.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ However, breast milk and breastfeeding, as represented by Renaissance painters, are also “life giving, beautiful, and healthy.” If you search online for “Madonna breastfeeding,” the first page results include www.churchpop.com with “Mary Nursing the Baby Jesus” and “Saint Peter’s List with more nursing Renaissance Madonnas.” (Last accessed September 2016). For a detailed connection between *The Lactation Station* and Western art history, see Charles Reeve, 2009, especially his extensive citations.

²⁴ Andrea Liss discussed this in her groundbreaking study *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

²⁵ The controversy around *The Lactation Station* in Toronto was well described and evaluated by Reeve (2009). It would suffice here to mention that minors were, ironically enough, banned from the exhibition.

²⁶ William Wilson, 1972, Feb 21, *Los Angeles Times*, G10.

²⁷ *Womanhouse*, Johanna Demetrakas, 47 minutes, DVD, New York: Women Make Movies, 1974. This man was a medical doctor and partner of one of the *Womanhouse* artists. His reaction speaks to my larger point about the refusal to be open to critical works, presenting them as confusing, difficult, or obtuse. It is even more astonishing that such lack of consideration to either the body or the art about the body is given by a medical doctor (who supposedly has female patients?), and an artist's partner (who supposedly has been exposed to preparation of this work)? I thank Faith Wilding for providing details about the documentary.

²⁸ Decades later a well-known art historian Jane Blocker describes the same work thus: "The purity of the veil, the gleaming white bathroom fixtures and walls, and the order of the boxes stand in stark contrast to the waste-basket filled with bloody tampons and feminine napkins. In this room viewers are forced to see the filth of the grotesque body, the excess of femininity that threatens the purity of architecture," Jane Blocker, "Woman-House: Architecture, Gender and Hybridity in What's Eating Gilbert Grape?" (*Camera Obscura* 13(3 39) (September 1996): 126–150), 136. Notice here the contrast between the whiteness of the installation as "pure" and bodily fluids as polluting, which I discussed earlier in Dobkin's aesthetic of *The Lactation Station*, where the whiteness of milk is accentuated by gallery walls and a hip bar setting.

²⁹ Wilson, 1972, Feb 21, *Los Angeles Times*, G10.

³⁰ <http://www.smalldeadanimals.com/archives/004146.html>. Last access February 24, 2017.

³¹ Ibid., just three examples: "Our tax dollars shouldn't go to freaks and geeks with no talent who don't want a real job. The real artists are those with talent and who don't beg for money"; "From Godless, Chapter one by Ann Coulter: 'This is a country in which taxpayers are forced to subsidize "artistic" exhibits of aborted fetuses, crucifixes in urine, and gay pornography. Meanwhile, it's unconstitutional to display a Nativity scene at Christmas'; and "As far as the Ottawa/CBC art crowd is concerned does anyone know if there is a way you could retroactively drown them all at birth" (all quotes from 2006 comments on the site cited above).

³² *Memories of the Revolution The First Ten Years of the WOW café Theater*, Holly Hughes, Carmelita Tropicana, and Jill Dolan, eds., (University of Michigan Press, 2015).

³³ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 94-101; Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (4): 631–660 (Summer 1980).

³⁴ I edit these lines now, in March of 2017, with a different sense of urgency for alternatives to "the canon." The community of feminist creative makers and scholars in the US faces the real possibility of regression, of being defunded, bullied, potentially persecuted and actively ignored through the strategies experienced by my colleague Holly Hughes, one of the NEA Four, in the 1970s.

³⁵ <http://newmaternalisms.com/press-coverage/>. Last accessed March 20, 2017.

³⁶ <http://newmaternalisms.com/keynote-video/>. Last accessed February 27, 2017.

³⁷ Natalie Loveless, as a scholar, artist, curator, and researcher, has dealt with the topic of breastfeeding in her own work as well, when she "gave a performance lecture on the maternal and the mandatorily-mobile body of the performance-artist-academic, while pumping 3k miles from my still breastfeeding son, and fed my milk to the audience afterward (also drinking it myself)." (Loveless, personal correspondence, March 2017, **fig 15**). Such affinities in using materials for creative work create that complexity to which I am referring here: there is a difference between approaching the work of one artist, taken in isolation, who uses breast milk as their material, and several artists, with different works, different sources and sensibilities, using the same type of medium. That is the reason I think that we cannot go back in time in our art critical and art historical discourses—the canon—and write as if such works have never been done, shown, and written about before.

³⁸ From *Interview*, January 15, 2017.

³⁹ The notion of "courage" was used by Dobkin and Loveless in relation to donors. Dobkin knew donors in Toronto, but in Edmonton she met them through Loveless and other connections. This creates a different kind of ecology of such new art works and performances, unheard of before in contemporary art world. I am especially interested in these new maternal ecologies built by, through, and around *The Lactation Station*.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Natalie Loveless describes this as "the background of relatedness" at the event (Personal Correspondence, March 2017). I certainly experienced this as a very fruitful and productive strategy.

⁴² Dobkin, 2012, 71.

⁴³ Dobkin, 2012, 69.

⁴⁴ I thank Holly Hughes and Jess Dobkin for interviews on this topic.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of this work as related to the feminist art of queer motherhood, see Liss, Andrea, 89–91.

⁴⁶ Dobkin, 2012. I've already mentioned how the iteration of this work in Edmonton seems to me to be less about maternal sexuality than the original project and performance in Toronto. This is something I'd like to discuss with the artist herself.

⁴⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0TencvK6ZU> (last accessed March 20, 2017), and *Animal Acts: Performing Species Today* (Critical Performances), Una Chauduri and Holly Hughes, eds. (University of Michigan Press, 2014).

⁴⁸ Personal correspondence, February 2017.

figure 15 | Natalie Loveless | *Performance Lecture*, 2016





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JESS DOBKIN's performance and curatorial projects are presented at museums, galleries, theatres, universities, and in public spaces internationally. She was active in the downtown performance art scene in New York City before moving to Toronto in 2002. Her performance practice is created in conversation and community, stirred by points of tension and dissonance, frictions and fractures. It is driven by a desire for meaningful, intimate exchange with an audience, where a potent performance can be a catalyst for dialogue and embody a sense of hope. Her photographic images, created to accompany her performances, are also published and exhibited as stand-alone works. She has taught as a Sessional Lecturer at OCAD University, the University of Toronto, and Sheridan College, and was a Fellow at the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies at the University of Toronto. She was the 2011–2012 Guest Curator of Harbourfront Centre's HATCH residency program and a member/co-curator of the 7a-11d International Festival of Performance Art from 2009–2012. Her most recent performance, *The Magic Hour*, was developed and produced through The Theatre Centre Residency program with the support of the Canada Council. Her film and video works are distributed by Vtape. She is a mother of one.





TESTING
THE **WATERS**

Jennie Klein on the art of Alejandra Herrera Silva

TESTING THE WATERS

Jennie Klein on the art of Alejandra Herrera Silva

Herrera Silva then picks up a handful of pebbles from the floor and starts throwing them at the corner glass cabinet with the plates, while singing what sounds like another Chilean political song. It has the rousing melody of a hopeful rebellion. In a great watershed of shattered glass, the cabinet breaks and all the dishes come crashing down and spilling forth. There is the sudden, shocking explosion, then welcomed relief in the sound of the collapse, like a wave breaking against the shore, or the confident remonstrance of calm uttered into chaos, as when a mother, in her wise authority, silences by saying, That's enough.

—Christine Pountney¹

In her blog written in conjunction with the opening night of *New Maternalisms: Redux* (University of Alberta, Edmonton, 2016) Pountney described a performance that became increasingly messy, culminating in the destruction of a glass cabinet filled with ceramic plates and wine glasses. The artist, Alejandra Herrera Silva, began her piece, *Testing the Waters*, as she has begun most of her performances/installations: dressed in white, surrounded by a pristine, predominantly white space filled with dishes, glasses, objects, and often a tub or container of water or milk. Sometimes blindfolded and sometimes not, Herrera Silva pours wine into her mouth, throws her head back, and allows the wine to trickle out of her mouth. The wine stains her white clothing, revealing white on white embroidered text in English and Spanish that was previously invisible. Unsuspecting members of the audience are always pulled into the performance in order to help destroy the space, often asked by Herrera Silva to pour or throw wine or milk onto her, hold objects, and in some cases, arm wrestle with her or drag her around by her hair. By the end of the evening, the space is trashed—filled with piles of broken dishes and stained, ruined garments hanging mutely on the wall. If the performance takes place within the context of a museum or gallery exhibition, the spilled water, milk or wine is mopped up, appliances used in the performance are unplugged, and the broken dishes and glass is re-swept into tidier piles that look less like an accident and more like an art installation. In spite of the clean-up, the pristine quality of the original space is gone. The traces of Herrera Silva's destruc-



tive actions remain: a mute reminder of the passage of her compact body through time and space.

Herrera Silva is the biological mother of three young girls. Many of her performances made after 2007 (the year her twins were born) have explicitly and deliberately invoked maternity and the ideology of motherhood, particularly as this ideology has impacted gendered roles in her native Chile and adopted city of Los Angeles. In 2009, she performed *Weapon/Nativity* at *City of Women* in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Pregnant at the time with her youngest child, Herrera Silva used her gravid body in a series of actions and images that contrasted the Chilean construction of man as state/nation/warrior with women as the “good mother.”² In *Sagrado Y Profano*, Herrera Silva created a pristine tableau at Human Resources that referenced the relationship between maternity, nationality, childhood and ideology.³ The space at Human Resources where she

performed *Sagrado Y Profano* included two starched white dresses (very small communion dresses, perhaps for her very young twin daughters?) onto which she dribbled red wine that revealed, embroidered onto them, the words *sagrado* and *profano*. Meanwhile the Chilean and U.S. National Anthems played in the background. Audience members were reluctantly persuaded to assist Herrera Silva in performing her own abjection which included upending a gallon of milk on Herrera Silva's head while she held two long stemmed roses between her teeth.⁴ Two years later Herrera Silva returned to Human Resources to perform *Catholic* with her twins Evelyn and Trinidad McMurry. For this piece, Herrera Silva and her young daughters used a plastic spray bottle to drench a white cloth that was hanging on a wall, revealing a quotation from Natalie S. Loveless, who had curated Herrera Silva into the first iteration of *New Maternalisms* (FADO, Toronto, CA) the previous year.

*In May 2010 I gave birth to a 4-pound, 9-ounce baby boy (two months prematurely). While I had (7) months to get used to the idea of being a mother, there is still nothing that could have prepared me for the radical, total shift of what it meant to be "me" in the world—what it meant to be an artist, academic, mother, suddenly reconfigured in terms of the limits of my body and its social visibility and value.*⁵

Not surprisingly, Herrera Silva's work has been read through the lens of the burgeoning field of maternal studies of which Loveless's recent work on the representation of the maternal is an important component.⁶ *Catholic* was the first time that her children had participated as active agents in one of her performances (although her youngest, Diamanda, had been "present" for *Weapon/Nativity*). Herrera Silva chose to use the opening paragraph of Loveless's essay "Maternal Ecologies," an essay in which Loveless wrote about a three-year performance with her son, *Action A Day*, that used the language of performance and art to recast the mother/child relationship just as Herrera Silva incorporated her children into her performance. Loveless's reasons for incorporating her son into an ongoing series of art actions addressed the very specific conditions of being a female academic in the global north during

the 21st century. At the onset of becoming a mother, Loveless suddenly found herself having to opt out of opportunities such as academic conferences and artists residencies after being asked to leave the baby at home.⁷ Rather than give in to the demand to suppress any mention of her child, Loveless determined instead to incorporate him *into* her academic and art making processes, which she expanded to include a network of like-minded mother artists. Herrera Silva's decision to include her children has likewise been read by Pountney, Loveless, and this author as a representation of maternal labour and care that challenges the way that academic and artistic practices "compound this isolation through their compulsory geographic mobility."⁸ Pountney, for example, equated Herrera Silva's actions with the drudgery of traditional maternal labour. "She takes off her dress, hangs it up, gets a clean shirt, lets her hair down, and sweeps up the mess. This is the dutiful repetition of the maternal, mother-tongue, motherhood, motherland, motherfucker." Loveless argued that Herrera Silva's performance *Challenge*, performed for the first iteration of *New Maternalisms* in 2012, "paints a poignant picture of some of the difficulties for artist mothers in a world where women still do the majority of the domestic labor."⁹ In 2014 I argued that Herrera Silva's performance represented a non-Oedipal maternal language. I invoked Bracha L. Ettinger's construction of the Matrixial Borderspace, a feminine and maternal psychic space in which the distinction between self and other is not yet apparent, in order to argue that Herrera Silva's work functioned as a kind of corporeal articulation of the "grains and crumbs" that remained alongside post-Oedipal subjectivity.¹⁰ Glossing over the fact that Herrera Silva came from Chile, a country with a repressive and violent history, I suggested that as a native Spanish speaker Herrera Silva was "motivated to use the corporeal and affective language of the Matrixial sphere, a poetic language that is more accessible than the written language of the country in which she is performing."¹¹

More significant, however, is Herrera Silva's invocation of trauma through the staining of the white, white surfaces, the shattering of glass and crockery, and the corporeal duress that Herrera Silva willingly undergoes in every performance. Ettinger had argued as well that



trauma could be processed through the agency of art/aesthetics, which led me to suggest, based on Herrera Silva's performance *Weapon/Nativity*, that her actions and imagery referenced and transformed the trauma of the war in the Balkans and the dictatorship in Chile. In fact, Herrera Silva does much more than simply reference or represent this trauma. Griselda Pollock, whose reading of trauma and aesthetics is heavily influenced by Ettinger's work, has suggested that psychic trauma resides, or colonizes, a subject that cannot know it and cannot name or represent the event or events with which it was initiated. It is a permanent absence. Art, Pollock argues, is a representation that returns the unknown traumatic event through temporizing and spatializing, which in turn creates a necessary distance from "the overwhelming, undigested thingness of trauma as perpetual but un-signified presentness." Stressing the importance of gesture over content, Pollock suggests that "the performative processes in the

artwork both take and index their own time to create a new space of encounter, that may become the place of a transformative registration of the *movement* between trauma and phantasy which does not knock out either end of the always vibrating string between them. Artworking itself becomes significant."¹²

Given the centrality of the aesthetic process in the psychic processing of trauma, Herrera Silva's work serves as witness to the traumatic event. Pollock, who was present in the audience when Herrera Silva performed *Testing the Waters*, might posit that her gestures/actions connect her matrixially with the pain of the other, allowing each other to both recognize and move forward from the original traumatic event. Herrera Silva's imagery comes from the Matrixial Borderspace, a pre-Oedipal maternal subjectivity that desires borderlinking and compassionate connections with others. For the past 15 years, even before becoming a biological mother, Herrera Silva has drawn upon this maternal feminist language to engage with Chile's recent past. Her work bears witness to the disappearance and torture of political dissidents in her native Chile, to the obliteration and destruction of the self and the self/national identity that resulted from the programmatic attempt to de-socialize and alienate an entire country through the systematic deployment of fear, torture, and repression on the part of the government, and to the familial bonds that were rent through with the destruction of culture. Born in Santiago in 1978, Herrera Silva grew up having never known anything other than the dictatorship of General Augusto José Ramón Pinochet Ugarte, which was established on September 11, 1973. The statement that Herrera Silva wrote for *Testing*



the Waters, which was posted on the wall prior to the performance and subsequent installation, is worth quoting in its entirety.

I believe that my maternal art work started way before I became a mother. Probably because of the way that, as a Chilean woman, I was taught a very traditionally gendered mode of being...I was a mother in waiting.

I was born in 1978, under the dictatorship of Pinochet. I grew up in a middle class house. My dad is a doctor; my mom a communist sympathizer who put her activism on hold when she became a mother so as not to put her children's lives in danger. In 1990, the dictatorship ended. I was born in a country ravaged by Pinochet, and came of age in a country desperately trying to rewrite, and right, its history.

In 2007 I became pregnant with twins. As a performance artist, I couldn't separate art from life. I moved to the U.S. I began to make performances with themes from my everyday experience of mothering as a foreigner in a foreign country.

Now, 9 years later, I am living back in Chile, raising three girls on territory that is still damaged and marked by the history of dictatorship. Testing the Waters comes from my experience of this return: working as a mother, back in my mother-land, with all of the cultural and political inheritances of my childhood around me.

—Alejandra Herrera Silva / May 2016

Herrera Silva's statement makes explicit the fact that her performances, performances that she acknowledges have always originated from a maternal space even before she became a mother, are an act of witnessing, remembering, and reinterpreting Chile's fraught past. Herrera Silva was born after the worst of the human rights violations occurred, although socialist dissenters—the remnants of President Salvador Allende Gossens's supporters—continued to be seized, tortured, and secretly executed throughout Pinochet's regime. Pinochet's military junta, which abolished civil liberties, dissolved the national congress and prohibited union activities while ushering in an era of aggressive neoliberal economic policies including deregulation and privatization,

ended in 1990 with the democratic election of Patricio Aylwin. President Aylwin created the National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, which released the 1991 Rettig Report on human rights violations committed during military rule. While this report was only able to count 2,279 cases of documented disappearances, it was very likely the that number was much, much higher, as the nature of disappearance, as opposed to being a political prisoner, meant that many of the lives lost were never documented or acknowledged.¹³ Herrera Silva was 12 years old when Pinochet's regime ended, although he remained the head of the military during the transition years of Aylwin's presidency. She became an adult as Chile was trying to grapple with its bloody and traumatic past, growing up in Santiago not far from the soccer stadium that had been used as a detention center. Reading through the work of Ettinger, Nicholas Abraham, and Maria Torok, Pollock has argued that

The survivor (first generation) lives in a chronic traumatic state, where only the denial of suffering and the perseverance of amnesia and oblivion allow the continuity of psychic life. The survivor's child (the second generation) carries the weight of the buried unknown knowledge of and for the survivor-parent while being re-cathected by the survivor as a carrier (memorial candle) of both the survivor's lost objects and encrypted phantoms.¹⁴

Herrera Silva's reference to Chile as the "mother-land" is significant here as it is clear that she carries the weight of Chile's/the mother-land's collective trauma. As an artist, she returns to the collective traumatic event in order to make what Pollock has termed a "creative, poetic, affective formalization" that can serve as a passage to the original traumatic encounter *and* a passage away from that encounter.¹⁵ In her performances, Herrera Silva returns again and again to imagery that hints at what transpired in Chile during the dictatorship of Pinochet—disorienting herself through the use of eye patches or blindfolds, deliberately taking off her street clothes and often stripping down to little more than her white panties, and placing her vulnerable body into incredibly uncomfortable, even torturous positions—hanging from the wall, struggling to hold up stacks of heavy plates, immersed in basins of cold milk or water, or walking gingerly across



broken glass and dishes with high heeled shoes that seem as though they were borrowed from another time or place. The corporeal duress that Herrera Silva endures—the blindfolds, the loss of identity, the extreme discomfort—all suggest and yet also transform the narratives of torture and imprisonment that those who survived Pinochet’s regime told upon release. Once taken, prisoners were often stripped, blindfolded, and “softened up” in order to be “receptive” when tortured. Antonius C.G.M. Robben, writing about the disappeared in Argentina (which assumed a military dictatorship three years after Chile), has stated that dissidents, many of them still little more than teenagers, were tortured not in order to obtain information, but to “imprint the regime’s incontestability, and make clear that any resistance is futile.”¹⁶ In Herrera Silva’s native Chile and neighboring Argentina the use of torture was seen as the quickest way to win the cultural war. Torture “became the continuation of war once public protest and guerrilla insurgency had been destroyed but revolutionary ideas survived.”¹⁷

Herrera Silva’s destruction of the performance space along with the abjection of her own body (the child of a former Marxist organizer forced to suppress her past to protect her children) both recalls or revisits the site of trauma (the collective trauma of her country and the specific trauma of her mother) *and* serves as a witness and a sharer of that trauma. Pollock, again drawing upon Ettinger, has suggested that this process goes well beyond simply witnessing as it involves a willingness to share and transform the original traumatic event. Pollock thus uses the term *wit(h)ness* in order to suggest the matrixial alliances, trans-subjective encounters that allow the viewer to be transformed through her/his encounter with the work of the artist.¹⁸ Herrera Silva explicitly chose not to make discrete objects, but to make work that is based on her actions, or gestures. Her work can be placed within a milieu of endurance/action work that pushes the body, the space, and the spectators/witnesses to their limits. Significantly, action art has been used to reference trauma—an act of destruction that both paves the way for new creations and bears witness to specific and horrific acts of destruction and erasure that have occurred in the 20th and 21st century. Herrera Silva is not the first action artist to reference and engage with trauma. Over 50 years earlier, in the

aftermath of Auschwitz and the atomic bomb, the two most horrifying events of the 20th century, the Polish-German Holocaust refugee, London-based but officially nationless artist Gustav Metzger and the Puerto Rican/New York-based Rafael Montañez Ortiz wrote separate manifestos on the centrality of destruction to art. Both artists drew a connection between the catastrophic events of the second World War and their destruction art. Metzger titled his three manifestos, written in 1959, 1960, and 1961, “Auto-Destructive Art,” which he suggested was “primarily a form of public art for industrial societies.”¹⁹ Auto-Destructive Art demonstrated “man’s power to accelerate disintegrative processes of nature.” It reflected “the chaos of capitalism and of Soviet communism, the co-existence of surplus and starvation; the increasing stockpiling of nuclear weapons—more than enough to destroy technological societies.”²⁰ Auto-Destructive Art, Metzger concluded, was “an attack on capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation.”²¹

The following year Montañez Ortiz wrote his own manifesto entitled “Destructivism.” Following Metzger, he suggested that Destructivism was a response to the massive destruction and chaotic conditions of contemporary culture. Montañez Ortiz compared destruction art to sacrificial rituals, claiming that destruction was cathartic and forced artists and audiences to purge their violent impulses and confront their fear of death. “The artist’s sense of destruction will no longer be turned inward in fear,” Montañez Ortiz wrote. “The art that uses the destructive processes will purge, for as it gives death, so will it give life.”²² In September of 1966, Metzger, along with filmmaker John J. Sharkey, organized a month-long international symposium, entitled Destruction in Art Symposium/DIAS, that took place in various locations throughout London. More than 100 artists participated in DIAS, either by sending art work or traveling to London to create destruction art for exhibitions and in performances. Montañez Ortiz performed a series of seven destruction events, including his piano destruction concerts.²³ Several performances were quite controversial, including that of the Vienna Actionist Hermann Nitsch, whose performance resulted in charges being brought against Metzger and Sharkey.



Destruction Art lacked a coherent style, nationality, or collective identity. It resisted assimilation and recognition. Although numerous artists participated in DIAS, only Metzger and Montañez Ortiz had written manifestos. Destruction Art was never a movement or an *ism*. Rather, it was an inclusive and compelling idea found in the work of many artists, one that can be seen in the work of contemporary artists such as Herrera Silva who have continued to use destruction as a way of facing down death and annihilation in order to affirm the power of creativity. Kristine Stiles has suggested that Destruction Art was both a causative principle consistent with the cycle of making *and* a “seditious measure to critique conventional aesthetic forms, to expand the material practices and political languages of art and poetry, and to demonstrate the social necessity for artists’ direct engagement in culture as a political force for change.”²⁴ For Stiles, Destruction Art was a means by which artists could assert subjectivity, resistance, and compassionate exchange in the face of a “genocidal mentality,” the harmful disassociation and disavowal brought on by the technological and biological destruction and trauma of the Atomic bomb and the Holocaust. To engage in culture as a political force for change is to bear “witness to the tenuous conditionality of survival—survival itself being the fundamental challenge posed by humanity in the 20th century and to humanity in the 21st century.”²⁵

Through the work of her performative actions, Herrera Silva has borne witness to the ability to survive a horrific period in the history of Chile that has been all but erased. Stiles has noted that the “vast majority of women’s destruction art explored the problem of the obliteration of identity and the decentering of the self.”²⁶ Stiles (and Pollock) have posited that this was due in part to the status of women in patriarchal culture, who struggled to gain subjectivity. Certainly this is true of Herrera Silva, who has written that “as a visual artist and contemporary woman, I engage in explorations to better understand the dynamics of male powers, particularly ones established in ‘macho’ cultures. As a result of those explorations, I seek to better understand the abilities of a woman’s power, or her actions, to overcome pervasive sociological and physical male dominance.”²⁷ Herrera Silva’s work

also creates what Macarena Gómez-Barris has called an “alternative memory symbolic.” If, according to Gómez-Barris, a memory symbolic (a term Gómez-Barris borrowed from Lauren Berlant) helps to cement the process of national identification through state led initiatives such as truth commissions and public memorials, then an alternative memory symbolic “can challenge and cast doubt on these limited renditions by suggesting that memory-making is complex, fluid, unending, and incomplete, it can construct, rather than merely flatten, human agency.”²⁸ Gómez-Barris, who, like Herrera Silva, comes from Chile, is concerned that the very real trauma of the Pinochet dictatorship on Chileans is not smoothed over by the symbolic strategies employed by the Chilean government in order to unify the capitalist nation-state of the present.

Although Gómez-Barris and Herrera Silva actually lived in close proximity to one another in the Los Angeles area, the former has never written about the latter, nor seen her performances. Nevertheless, Herrera Silva’s work actively constructs an alternative memory symbolic of the Pinochet dictatorship. In *Testing the Waters*, for example, Herrera Silva, as she has with all of her performances (including the 2014 Chilean performance *History of Resistance*), deliberately started with a white (washed) space. The white space recalls another white washing job mentioned in Gómez-Barris’s book that took place at the close of the Pinochet regime. In 1992, the newly democratic nation of Chile sent an iceberg from Patagonian waters to the world fair in Seville, Spain. The iceberg was symbolic, evidence of Chile’s newly pristine democracy, as well as practical—Chile demonstrated that it could also send fruits and vegetables to other parts of the world without fear of spoilage. Critics of Chile’s transition to democracy accused the iceberg, nicknamed *el blanqueo* or whitening, of literally erasing Chile’s violent and bloody past.²⁹ In fact, in the early 90s, a flurry of activity took place that simultaneously erased and acknowledged that history in order to make way for the new, global capitalist state. It is thus symbolic that Herrera Silva, who came of age at that time, undoes the whiteness of the space, filling it with broken glasses and dishes, spilled wine, water, and milk, and, in the case of *Testing the Waters*, smashed glass and stained garments.



Testing the Waters included references to Pinochet as well. At the beginning of the performance, Herrera Silva placed a revolving white “Apple” with two images of Pinochet (one with a snake head) on a small shelf. Wearing a white shift not yet stained by wine, she knelt before the clock, applying perfume as though making the sign of the cross, and appearing to pray to the apple. The official seal/coat of arms of Chile hung on the wall. Laid carefully on the floor was a large sheet of glass with Verse III of the Chilean national anthem, made from plastic press-on letters, clearly visible. Verse III, although written prior to Pinochet, had not been included when the Chilean National Anthem was performed. Pinochet added it because of the references to soldiers. This would have been the version of the National Anthem that Herrera Silva sang while growing up.

*Vuestros nombres, valientes soldados,
que habéis sido de Chile el sostén,
nuestros pechos los llevan grabados;
los sabrán nuestros hijos también.
Sean ellos el grito de muerte
que lancemos marchando a lidiar,
y sonando en la boca del fuerte
hagan siempre al tirano temblar.*

*Your names, brave soldiers
who have been Chile's mainstay,
they are engraved in our chests;
our children will know them as well.
May they be the death cry
that comes out when we march to the fight,
and ringing in the mouth of the strong
they always make the tyrant tremble.³⁰*

Periodically Herrera Silva dragged and pushed this heavy sheet of glass around the room, rendering the third verse of the failed military junta into an unwieldy and very breakable object. As the performance waned, Herrera Silva laid the glass in front of the gallery corner in which another large sheet of glass held in place a pile of black plates,



clear glasses, and white plates and cups. Singing the National Anthem, Herrera Silva threw stones at the glass containing the crockery until it broke, allowing the plates and glass to spill out and shatter over the third verse of the Chilean national anthem. In so doing, she covered Pinochet’s legacy without erasing it, allowing the traces to remain.

Throughout the performance, Herrera Silva repeatedly swept up broken glass and piles of crockery, imperfectly cleaning up after the symbolic and literal destruction of the space. She also immersed herself in a basin of water, cleansing her own body only to once again stain it with red wine. The Sisyphean sweeping and cleansing recall the words of Tristan Tzara, also reeling from an inconceivable and traumatic war when he wrote the Dada Manifesto in 1918. “Let each man proclaim: there is a great deal of negative work of destruction to be accomplished. We must sweep and clean. Affirm the cleanliness of the individual after the state of madness.”³¹ Dada could be seen as one of the earliest manifestations of Destruction Art,³² and Tzara’s words, which stress the importance of “cleaning up” after the destruction acknowledged the intersectionality of destruction for creation, what Stiles referred to as engaging with survival. In a thoughtful essay about the architectural history of Chile’s disappeared, Karen Elizabeth Bishop has stressed the difficulty inherent in representing and memorializing those who disappeared in the 70s and 80s in Latin America, people whose existence was erased and whose deaths were never acknowledged.



For those artists, activists, and scholars whose work takes up how to represent and memorialize the enforced bodily disappearances carried out by the military dictatorships governing Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, absence is not a remainder of memory work but rather the object itself of memory. And remembering or commemorating the absence that defines the political disappearance systematically generated in the clandestine detention and torture centers of the Southern Cone requires a particular set of memorial strategies.³³

How to acknowledge an unknown number of deaths that will never be acknowledged or confirmed? Having tasked herself with an almost impossible job, Herrera Silva turned to her body, her actions, destruction and an aesthetic language, *matrixial* language that engages with and moves on from trauma. Her performances serve as a powerful reminder of the centrality of art and culture, and a beacon of hope for the indestructibility of both. They serve as well as a reminder of the radical political potential of the maternal, and of maternal language. ■

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Christine Pountney, <http://newmaternalisms.ca/blog/> Viewed January 9, 2017.
- ² For more information on this performance see Mara Vujić, “Weapon-Nativity,” <http://www.cityofwomen.org/en/content/2009/project/weapon-nativity> Viewed January 11, 2017.
- ³ *Sagrado y Profano* was performed in 2011 at the Free Clinic #2 Event, at Human Resources Gallery in Chinatown. It was organized by the Action Bureau.
- ⁴ Geoff Tuck, “A Few Recent Performances,” *Notes on Looking: Contemporary Art in Los Angeles*. November 16, 2011. <http://notesonlooking.com/2011/11/a-few-recent-performances/> Viewed January 14, 2017. A video of this piece can be seen on youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_rcj8JD40U
- ⁵ Natalie Loveless, “Maternal Ecologies: A Story in Three Parts,” *Performing Motherhood: Artistic, Activist, and Everyday Enactments*, Amber E. Kinser, Kryn Freehling-Burton, and Terry Hawkes, eds. (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2014), 149.
- ⁶ Loveless’s publications on maternity and maternal ideology include *New Maternalisms* (Toronto, FADO Performance Space, 2012), *New Maternalisms/Maternidades Y Nuevos Feminismos* (Santiago, Chile: Museo De Arte Contemporáneo MAC-Museo Nacional De Bellas Artes MNBA, 2014), and *An Action A Day: Maternal Prescriptions* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, Department of Art and Design, 2014; www.maternalecologies.ca). For an updated bibliography on maternal theory, art, and performance, that includes collectives, publications and exhibitions, see Emily Underwood-Lee and Lena Šimić, “Live Art and Motherhood: A Study Room Guide on Live Art and the Maternal,” (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2016). www.thisisliveart.co.uk Viewed January 16, 2017.
- ⁷ Loveless, “Maternal Ecologies,” 150.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.
- ⁹ Loveless, *New Maternalisms*, (2012), 4.
- ¹⁰ Bracha Lichte Ettinger, “Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter Event,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, 21, 1 (2006): 69–93.
- ¹¹ Jennie Klein, “Grains and Crumbs: Performing Maternity,” *Performing Motherhood*, 285.
- ¹² Griselda Pollock, *After-affects/After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 3.
- ¹³ Wikipedia contributors, “History of Chile,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=History_of_Chile&oldid=760904765 Viewed January 22, 2017. For a discussion of the difference between the disappeared and the political prisoners, see Antonius C.G. Robben, *Political Violence and Trauma in Argentina*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 213–260.
- ¹⁴ Pollock, 21.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹⁶ Robben, *Political Violence*, 223.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

- ¹⁸ Pollock, 15.
- ¹⁹ Gustav Metzger, “Auto-Destructive Art, Machine Art, Auto Creative Art,” [third manifesto], 1961. Collection of the Archiv Sohm, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, reproduced in Russell Ferguson, ed. *Damage Control: Art and Destruction Since 1950*, (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2014), 181.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Rafael Montañez Ortiz, “Destructivism: a manifesto by Rafael Montañez Ortiz, 1962,” *Rafael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior 1960, Years of the Psyche 1988* (New York, NY: El Museo Del Barrio, 1988).
- ²³ For more information on Destruction Art and DIAS, see the following essays by Stiles: “Destruction Art,” *Reading Contemporary Performance: Theatricality Across Genres*, Meiling Cheng and Gabrielle H. Cody, eds., (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 197–198; “Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions,” *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object*, Russel Ferguson, ed. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 272–274, and *The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the “DIAS affect,”* Gustav Metzger, Sabina Breitweiser, ed., *Geschichte Geschichte* (Vienna & Ostfildern-Ruit: Generali Foundation and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005): 41–65, available on the internet at https://web.duke.edu/art/stiles/KristineStilesDIAS_Affect-2.pdf
- ²⁴ Stiles, “Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium,” https://web.duke.edu/art/stiles/KristineStilesDIAS_Affect-2.pdf, 1. Accessed January 5, 2017.
- ²⁵ Kristine Stiles, *Concerning Consequences: Studies in Art, Destruction, and Trauma*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 46.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.
- ²⁷ Alejandra Herrera Silva, “Artistic Statement,” 2016, unpublished.
- ²⁸ Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Where Memory Dwells: Culture and State Violence in Chile*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 5–6.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3–4.
- ³⁰ Wikipedia contributors, “National Anthem of Chile,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=National_Anthem_of_Chile&oldid=758947538 Accessed January 30, 2017.
- ³¹ Tristan Tzara, “Dada Manifesto,” 1918, quoted in Russell Ferguson, “The Show is Over,” *Damage Control*, 105.
- ³² Russell Ferguson places Tzara and the Dada Manifesto at the beginning of his essay on Destruction in Art.
- ³³ Karen Elizabeth Bishop, “The Architectural History of Disappearance: Rebuilding Memory Sites in the Southern Cone,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 73 n. 4 (December 2014): 557.



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ALEJANDRA HERRERA SILVA is a visual and performance artist. Her works are installation- and performance-based and, through the explorations of her own body and gender, reference the inevitable biological implications that the body has as a social and political being. In recent years, she has been working on the issue of maternity and domestic life. Herrera Silva received her BFA from the Universidad de Chile, followed by further studies in Valencia, Spain and Belfast, Northern Ireland. She is the co-founder of PERFOPUERTO (Independent Organization of Performance Art based in Chile, 2002–2007) with several grants from FONDART (National Fund for The Arts and Culture of Chile) and DIRAC (Department of Cultural Affairs / Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Chile). Her work has been presented in performance exhibitions all over the world including *Buzzcut* in Glasgow, *Trouble* in Belgium, *Anti* in Finland, *City of Woman* in Slovenia, *7a*11d* in Canada, and other countries such as Germany, Poland, Japan, Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, United States, and Northern Ireland. She is from Chile, but currently lives and works in Los Angeles, California, USA. She is the mother of three daughters: Diamanda, Trinidad and Evelyn.



MATERNAL ETHICS:
THE **ART OF CURIOSITY**

Andrea Liss on the art of Lenka Clayton



MATERNAL ETHICS: THE ART OF CURIOSITY

Andrea Liss on the art of Lenka Clayton

Still Lives, October 21, 2016

The day began with glorious moments of gentle rain. Luscious raindrops made patterns on the leaves of the roses in my garden. Then a subtle rainbow appeared. In my mind I called you to share this little miracle. But the best I could do was write to you in my journal, 'Still Lives.' You always delighted in these moments of surprise and unexpected beauty. Then I suddenly remembered that story from my childhood, from your early years of motherhood, that you enjoyed recounting to only my closest of friends when we were both adults. 'One day, when you were two years old, you wanted some water. I went into the kitchen and opened the cabinet to get you a cup. You rejected one cup after the other that I held out to show you. I exhausted every possibility on the bottom shelf, and had to fetch a stepstool to reach the higher shelves. Again, cup after cup you shook your head "no." Then, finally, I pulled out a colored cup from the highest shelf in the cupboard. You shook your head with a determined "yes."'

My mother's responses — at the time of the original occurrence and emphasized every time she retold this story — were a blend of exasperation and delight. I think she was impressed by my focused determination, my ability to know or feel what delighted me. I think she reveled in the everyday wonder that this little jewel, a speckled plastic cup, gave me such happiness. I know she found it amusing and wonderful that she could simply climb on a ladder to capture this treasure for me.

My mother worked outside of the home. She conducted her business with kindness and intelligence. At home she was practical, busy with domestic chores, yet time always seemed to be on her side. As a child, the only division I could discern that she made between work outside our home and the work inside was her practice of swiftly changing her clothes upon returning home. Off went the stylish but never showy outfits and on went the jeans and loose-fitting blouses. That was the moment when the real performance of work began. She would proceed to make dinner and do laundry with an organized fluidity. The structure of the everyday she created was practical, organized, calm. In my mother's performance of mothering there was always time for play, wonder, and tenderness. Her maternal caring extended beyond our



figure 1 | Lenka Clayton | *Maternity Leave* (detail), 2011

household and embraced the lives of neighbors, and often the lives of strangers. My mother's maternal labour brought revelations to the practice of the everyday.

Thinking about multidisciplinary artist Lenka Clayton's aesthetic of play, curiosity, delight, and caring in her impressive array of artwork brought about enchanted remembrances of my mother. Her practical approach to daily impediments and getting on with life also share deep affinities with Clayton's *modus operandi*, with Clayton's efficient and self-determined artistic actions undertaken in response to patriarchal culture's unrelentingly hateful political and psychic devaluations of artist-mothers and their children. Her earliest maternal performance was a brilliant response to the psychic embarrassment of the pregnant body and its supposed cultural hindrances, as well as a creative embrace of the changes going on in her own body during the late stages of pregnancy with her first child. Clayton produced *Maternity Leave*, 2011, at the Carnegie Museum of Art, in which she placed in the blank gallery space a plastic baby monitor atop a white pedestal (fig 1). As visitors approached they could hear a baby crying, or a lullaby — the baby's

sounds were live-linked to her nursery, and people experienced what was going on at that moment in her home. Clayton negotiated with the Carnegie Museum to be on “maternity leave” from her work as an artist and that they pay her just under \$200.00 a week (the same as the United Kingdom’s government stipend The Maternity Allowance, for which she would be eligible if she were in the United Kingdom, her country of origin) for the duration of the show.¹ *Maternity Leave* was a practical, efficient, seemingly simple yet profound response to her new maternal body and newly forming maternal structure. As an artist’s and mother’s provocation it was aimed at patriarchal culture’s deep-rooted desire to make mothers and children silent, leaving no trace of their presence as labour and economy. Furthermore, Clayton cleverly approached the woman artist’s and mother’s conundrum of managing the labour of artwork and the work of mothering by bringing together both endeavors into the museum space, and in so doing created a wry public negotiation of this cultural dilemma. *Maternity Leave* also represents a performance where lived reality and its staged metaphors collide in ways that provoke the entire enterprise of making boundaries between mothering, art making, and institutionalized economies. Clayton’s performance brought new value to maternal economies based on duration, repetition, immediate responses to unexpected demands, and the value of caring for others. This work is reminiscent of artist Léa Lublin’s earlier revolutionary public performance *Mon fils*, 1968, where she tended to her seven-month-old son Nicolas during the entire duration of the exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Visitors witnessed the mother caring for her infant, including hearing the sounds of maternal labour.² These maternal strategies play upon the rich and revolutionary collaborative performance tradition forged by pioneer artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s groundbreaking *Maintenance Art* projects developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, borne from her own domestic work in collaboration with the labour of New York City’s sanitation workers and other public servants. Ukeles’ loving respect for the labour of others created the foundation for a maternal ethics in visual art based on the mother-child dyad that embraced other public intersubjective relationships. Clayton’s solo and collaborative maternal performances follow the spirit of

Ukeles’s embracing methodology, as outlined in her practical, witty, and wry *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, 1969.³

In affinity with Ukeles’s foundational concepts, Clayton re-imagines the performance of the maternal as a creative interconnection between artist, working mother, and the institutions with which their daily lives interact. These artists’ revolutionary and no-nonsense responses to the unrelenting devaluation of maternal labour are found in their shared *modus operandi*: grant yourself the gift of what is normally taken for granted, claim the value of your maternal and artistic territory, perform your claims in public space, create a structure for the value of your practice, and articulate the value of this structure. It is precisely these provocations to acknowledge and respect maternal and artistic labour that brought Clayton to first produce *An Artist Residency in Motherhood*, 2011 – 2015, a self-directed artist residency, funded by the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council, that took place simultaneously in her residence, in her studio, and in the public spaces where she and her son interacted (fig 2).

The business cards that Clayton printed for her *Artist Residency in Motherhood* signal her no-nonsense approach to the work to be done (fig 3). The commercial typeface and the words announcing her enterprise assure the general public that motherhood is serious business. Motherhood is a profession. In addition, this is a mother who documents her work. In light tones of irony, Clayton adds to her collection a grocery receipt showing the purchase of necessary food for her son: not one banana but one hundred (fig 4).

Encapsulated in this scrap of paper is a statement of the presence of work heavily tinged with the mundane, the documentation of repetition. One imagines Clayton in a performance of chopping, slicing, and mashing this large quantity of bananas. The actual labour and psychic energy involved in feeding a young child recalls Mary Kelly’s painstakingly detailed and matter-of-fact approach to this anguish-filled necessity in her 1974 *Post-Partum Document*, ‘*Documentation I: Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts*.’ Clayton’s wry gesture of putting a list of

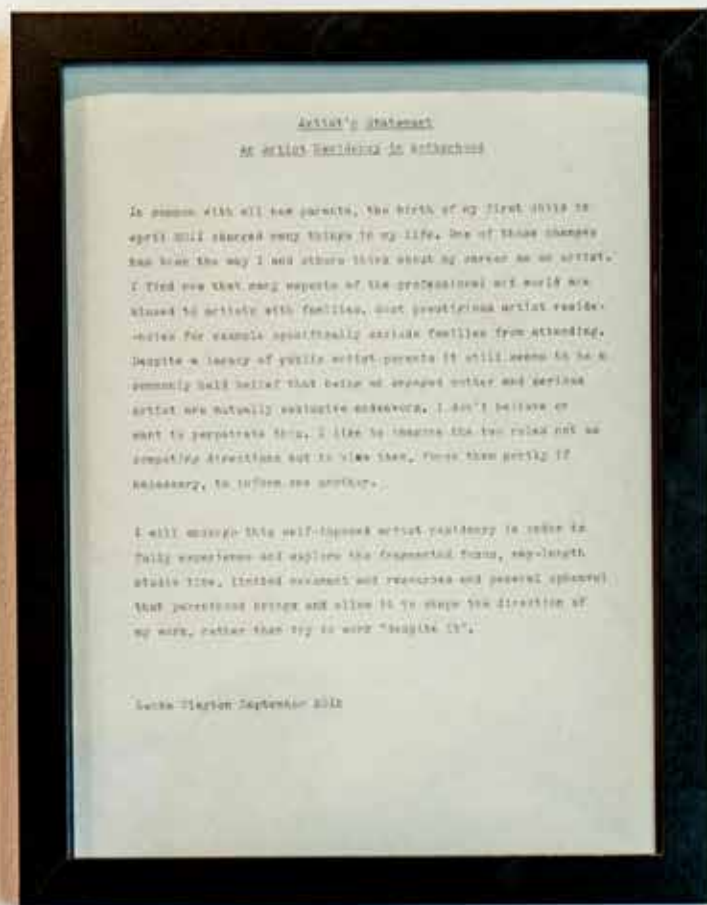


figure 2 | Lenka Clayton | *An Artist Residency in Motherhood* (detail), 2011–2015



figure 3 | Lenka Clayton | *An Artist Residency in Motherhood* (detail), 2011–2015

edible, vanishing substances into a collection of objects, an entity meant to endure, cunningly positions such documentation as valid representation of maternal labour.

The collection *All Scissors in the House Made Safer*, 2014 (fig 5) attests to the maternal space of uneasiness, the surreal yet all too possible reality of a child accidentally being harmed by a dangerous everyday object that an adult (read: mother) forgot to remove and put in a safe place. Yet Clayton's scissors allay such fears: she transforms their danger by playfully rendering them unusable through the process of wet-felting, in which she wrapped each pair in raw wool, hot water and soap. After hours of handling, the scissors became enclosed in a tight woolen skin. Acknowledgement of maternal fear and the need to give a young child her/his sense of self through the exploration of the everyday environment is also evident in the video series *The Distance I Can Be From My Son*, 2013, a series of three videos (presented in *New Maternalisms: Redux*) in which Clayton attempted to objectively measure the farthest distance she could bear to be from her son (figs 6, 7, 8). She videotaped these moments in a vast space in a city park, a supermarket aisle, and an alley. Clayton created a space of play and anxiety in the negotiation between the freedom the mother can bear to give her child and the space, the distance, that becomes the mother's fear for her child's safety. Mother, father, grandparent, neighbor, and anyone who cares for a child is brought to the edge of our limits with Clayton at just the moment when she enters the space to rein in her son. As with *All Scissors in the House Made Safer*, in *The Distance I Can Be From My Son* Clayton engages with anxiety and transforms it into relief, humor, and playfulness. These video plays indicate the repetitive psychological processes involved in taking care of a child, such as continuous moments of focused attention, disruption, and constant re-orientation. These are not home videos; they are performances of intersubjective negotiation between mother and child. Making them public performances allows the viewer to respond viscerally, to become a participant, to testify to the complicated work of caring for a child, for a precarious life in formation. Here, Clayton's portrayal of the mother as one who attempts to objectively measure the distance between herself and her child is an ironic strategy to create an



figure 5 | Lenka Clayton | *All Scissors in the House Made Safer*, 2014

It is remarkable for an artist-mother of young children to embark on huge-scale projects that involve others outside of the mother/child dyad, as with *One Brown Shoe*. Indeed, even before Clayton had children, she created large-scale projects invested in an extended concept of maternal ethics. *People in Order—Love* and *People in Order—Age*, collaborations with James Price, 2006, are two of four three-minute videos from a participatory project (**fig 11**).⁵ In *People in Order—Love*, 48 couples appear in ascending order of the length of their relationship. Responding to the artist's seemingly simple questions about how long they have been together and what traits they like about each other, we witness a teenage couple nervously giggling—they may have just met that day—to the thoughtful and loving responses of people who have grown to understand each other over many years. These simple yet profound questions reveal the varying concept of love and one's changing sense of self. The couples' reflections are immediate and succinct. Some are caught in silence. The visual format of the interviews frame the couples standing up and looking directly at the camera. Each person's height, posture, and facial features are distinct. As couples, some appear mismatched; others more physically aligned. This tender project uncannily foreshadows the visual metaphors of love and intersubjectivity at work in the later project *One Brown Shoe*. In *People in Order—Age*, people appear in ascending order from one to 100 years of age (**fig 12**). Clayton and Price gave each participant a drum and drumsticks and asked them to tap on the drum and then announce their age. The level of enthusiasm and proficiency of response begins shakily and rises at a steady rate, then slowly decreases despite cheerful attempts. *People in Order—Age* and *People in Order—Love* witness interactions among those who appear in the videos, but they also bring the viewer into the emotional investments that are acted out. These overlapping psychic spaces are tender embraces of others in which we see the silhouettes of ourselves.

Conversation, 2006 (**figs 13 & 14**), a seven-minute video work made in collaboration with James Price, depends on projections of identity based solely on a person's appearance. The artists invited strangers they

met on a busy street in the East End of London into a basement studio and took pictures of them looking directly into the camera. Then they showed each participant short snippets of all the other participants' portraits and asked them to share their immediate impressions of the other based solely on that person's appearance in the video portrait. The artists videotaped their participants' responses and then placed each separate interview side by side, creating an unrehearsed composition that at first leads the viewer to think of affinities between the individuals. The viewer begins to perceive a pattern where, for example, one person describes the other as 'kind, generous,' which is immediately followed with 'quick to become angry' or another opposing characteristic. Clayton and Price do not judge. Nor do they give the viewer any documentary evidence about the participants' cultural beliefs or past experiences. These seemingly simple, un-researched pollings reveal a humanist belief in the goodness of people and yet are tinged with a more sinister underbelly of preconceived cultural stereotypes based on lack of knowledge. The piece leaves the viewer—depending on her or his cultural biases—with a sense of caution about how we classify others. *Conversations* seems like an anomaly, the underside of the optimistic spirit that carries through Clayton's work. Yet it serves as a cautionary note to do the hard work of moving beyond the surface of culturally ingrained mistruths and to seek common ground.

Two Itinerant Quilters, like the earlier *Conversations* video, was an encounter among strangers (**fig 15**). This work is enriched by Clayton's maternal research and the desire to sow fertile ground through chance

figures 6, 7 & 8 | Lenka Clayton | *The Distance I Can be From My Son (series)*, 2013





figure 11 | Lenka Clayton with James Price | *People in Order—Love*, 2006



figure 12 | Lenka Clayton with James Price | *People in Order—Age*, 2006

250 participants. Among the many poignant reflections given by artist-participants, one artist attests to the enormous value of belonging to a maternal and artistic community and working against normalizing motherhood: “I LOVE knowing that there are others out there like me, working in the scraps of time we have, working with and against this new and strange love we’ve created.”⁶ The support system Clayton developed for others unequivocally claims that their childcare labour

deserves economic and cultural recognition. This structure further insinuates that maternal/paternal encounters of love developed in the home are metaphors for transactional relationships that take place in public.

Endurance of kindness and generosity of spirit permeate Clayton’s intersubjective artworks and collaborative performances. Her work incites delight, caring, and respect based in a critical maternal ethics informed by the documentation of personal and historical memory. Such a philosophy calls for the transformation of maternal caring into magnified actions where local communities carry out sustained and heightened manifestations of support for all of their citizens, where politics is infused with respect and thoughtful consensus, where hard borders—real geographic and economic borders as well as psychic limits—are replaced with tender embraces that complicate simple binary oppositions, and where spaces of public and private collide and coalesce. Clayton’s generous encounters echo the crucial thinking articulated by philosopher Cornel West, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”⁷ Her embracing work reveals a depth and complexity of human experience and vulnerability, an honesty so poignant it pierces cynicism, suggesting a philosophy toward others and one’s self based in respect and curiosity, an approach simply and majestically named love.

figure 13 & 14 | Lenka Clayton with James Price | *Conversation*, 2006





figures 15 & 16 | Lenka Clayton | *Intinerant Quilters*, 2015

Still Lives, January 21, 2017

It has been raining torrentially for the past few days. The light is just breaking through the clouds in layered tones of grey and lavender, the colors of your favorite rose in my garden. The Women's March is today, your birthday. Mama Shirley, you would be deeply saddened and outraged by the disrespectful and hateful political climate in the United States directed toward mothers, women, and all people who care for and about others. You would counsel me to fight thoughtfully, to take your grandson Miles with me, to gather with others in courage and love. These imaginings bring back a memory of your generous spirit and the ways your maternal caring extended beyond our household and embraced the lives of strangers. Remember that night you gave Miles a generous amount of money before we went out to dinner? When we arrived at the restaurant Miles was pleased to see Joseph, a lovely and wise homeless Vietnam War veteran who we often encountered outside this establishment. Without hesitation, Miles gave the money you had just given him to Joseph. Then Miles introduced you to Joseph, you took his hand and looked deeply into his eyes. He told us that he was going to buy a tent and a radio with this money. Then you looked at Miles tenderly. We knew that caress meant you were proud of his generosity and caring. Mama Shirley, in the intangibility of deep knowledge we feel the loving revelations you bring, still, to the everyday practice of love and justice. ■



FOOTNOTES

¹ Clayton worked with curator Dan Byers on this project.

² *WACK! and the Feminist Revolution*, exhibition and catalogue organized by Cornelia Butler and edited by Lisa Gabrielle Mark at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London), 262–3.

³ Andrea Liss, “Maternal CARE: Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ Maintenance Art,” in *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 43–68.

⁴ This project was released as a limited-edition publication in 2013.

⁵ This project was made with Fulcrum TV and commissioned by Kate Vogel for the *3 Minute Wonder* strand on Channel 4 television.

⁶ This quote by Amy Sacksteder and those by other participants in *An Artist Residency in Motherhood* can be found on the website www.artistresidencyinmotherhood.com. See also the extensive website www.lenkaclayton.com for beautiful documentation of the work Clayton created during her own *Artist Residency in Motherhood*. *An Artist Residency in Motherhood* was funded by the Investing in Professional Grants Program, a partnership of the Pittsburgh Foundation and the Heinz Endowments and a Sustainable Art Foundation Award. The project was supported in kind by Pittsburgh Filmmakers and the Pittsburgh Center for Creative Reuse.

⁷ Cornel West, *Brother West, Living and Loving Out Loud: A Memoir* (New York: Smiley Books, 2009), 232.

Andrea Liss's essay first appeared under a different title in the June 2017 special issue “On the Maternal,” *Performance Research* 22, 4, 127–130. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1374760>.

Lenka Clayton | *63 Objects Taken From My Son's Mouth* (detail), 2012 ▶





DR. ANDREA LISS's engagement with feminist art, gender encounters and the maternal embraces writing, research, teaching, curating, and community collaboration. Her book *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009) is critically noted as a pioneering book in the fields of maternal studies and visual culture. Dr. Liss is passionate about new forms of knowledge that arise when thinking through the maternal as lived experience and as critical discourse where love and compassion are the founding ethics of cultural politics. Her current projects are concerned with maternal ethics, intergenerational memories, mourning, and social justice. She is currently working on the book *Gender, Justice and Hope*. Projects include "Maternal Aesthetics: The Surprise of the Real," a guest curated issue of *Studies in the Maternal*, issue 5(1), 2014, and the exhibition *Reel Mothers: Film, Video Art and the Maternal* at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido, 2016. Dr. Liss is also the author of *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Dr. Liss is a Professor of Contemporary Visual Culture and Cultural Theory in the School of Arts at California State University San Marcos and is a recent recipient of a Fulbright Scholar Award. Her son Miles's sense of justice is a foundation for her work.

LENKA CLAYTON is an artist and founder of *An Artist Residency in Motherhood*. Her interdisciplinary work considers, exaggerates, and alters the accepted rules of everyday life, extending the familiar into the realms of the poetic and absurd. In previous works she's hand-numbered 7,000 stones; searched for 613 people mentioned in an edition of a German newspaper; filmed one person of every age from 1 to 100, and reconstituted a lost museum from a sketch on the back of an envelope. For three years she was the world's first Artist-in-Residence-in-Motherhood after she founded a fully-funded artist residency that took place inside her own home. On Mother's Day 2016, *An Artist Residency in Motherhood* became an open-source project, and there are currently almost 300 Artists-in-Residence-in-Motherhood in 31 countries on six continents. Clayton's previous work has been widely exhibited including at FRAC Le Plateau in Paris, Kunstmuseum Linz in Austria, Kunsthalle St. Gallen in Switzerland, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Anthology Film Archives and MoMA in New York City, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas, the Tehran International Documentary Festival, and on BBC Radio 4 and Channel 4 Television in the UK. Clayton is a Pittsburgh Creative Development Grant and Sustainable Arts Foundation Award recipient and was recently presented a Carol R. Brown Award for Creative Achievement. She is a mother of two.



MATERNAL DIALOGUES:
LOVELESS & BAGGESEN IN CONVERSATION





New Maternalisms: Redux opened May 12, 2016, as part of an international colloquium called **Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene**. The colloquium, co-organized by Natalie S. Loveless and Sheena Wilson, was held inside an iteration of Danish-US artist Lise Haller Baggesen's *Mothersism* installation (May 11–14, 2016; funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, with additional funding and support from the Kule Institute for Advanced Study, the Arts-Based Research Studio, and the Departments of Art & Design, English & Film Studies, Human Ecology, Political Science, Sociology, Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Alberta). Participants included Irina Aristarkhova, Lise Haller Baggesen, Rachel Epp Buller, Myrel Chernick, Cecily Devereux, Christa Donner, Deirdre M. Donoghue, Terri Hawkes, Nat Hurley, Tina Kinsella, Jennie Klein, Robyn Lee, Andrea Liss, Irene Lusztig, Margaret Morgan, Christine Pountney, Asma Sayed, Carrie Smith-Prei, Kim TallBear, and Janice Williamson, with Griselda Pollock as distinguished keynote participant. ■

A CONVERSATION WITH
LISE **HALLER BAGGESEN**

An interview by Natalie Loveless



A CONVERSATION WITH LISE HALLER BAGGESEN

An interview by **Natalie Loveless**

This short interview, between Loveless and Baggesen, took place in Banff, Alberta, Canada in January 2017. It is followed by an augmented version of the text Baggesen presented at the symposium.

■ LOVELESS:

Lise, I've long been a fan of your 'Motherism' work and it was an honour to have it as the centerpiece of our colloquium. I want to start by asking you a couple of broad questions: **1** could you tell us about your feminist foremothers and sisters — those you have been most influenced and inspired by? And **2** what do you think is most interesting and important about this topic — feminist art and the maternal — today?

■ BAGGESEN:

Last night, I had a nightmare. It was today and Donald Trump was president.

This is a line from the poem *Dreams and Nightmares* which my daughter's slam poetry team wrote about two years ago, and performed at several occasions — most recently celebrating MLK day, on January 16th 2017.

As of this morning, January 21st, this nightmare is the reality we all woke up to. My daughter and husband are marching in DC as I write this. I must confess to feeling a little useless and out of touch here in my artist's residency in Banff — so we are doing a Woman's March on Tunnel Mountain later today. Meanwhile, my teenage boy is at home with chronic pain. A dear friend of ours is looking after him, and her own two little ones, while we march. *Motherism* is very much about this quotidian quality of resistance—resistance as an act of care that we carry out every day, where we are, and by whichever means possible, and for all of those who cannot do it themselves. Marching in DC, or in the Canadian Rockies, is a privilege (and hopefully a pleasure) but we mustn't forget that the struggle is real, everywhere and every day.

In *Motherism* (in the epilogue "On the Mo(u)rning of Margaret Thatcher's Passing") I write at length about a particular moment in history, which was also a coming of age moment for myself. As a Cold War kid, I remember being very scared when Reagan took office. I thought the world was going to end. I see a similar thing happening for my daughter, who is now about the same age as I was then. She and her peers are acutely

aware of the impact this election will have on them, and on their own disenfranchisement in the process. They are petrified about what is going to come (or not). But, the end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop. And so, we must care harder. I cannot look my daughter in the eye and say that everything is going to be alright, but I also cannot look her in the eye and tell her we are not going to try. So, if you ask me why I am doing this work today, it is because it seems more important than ever — more important than when I was my daughter's age, more important than when I wrote my book, more important than yesterday.

Part of this work is also acknowledging that we have a heritage and a lineage, of course. That we have a (feminist and art) history and a canon that can be both referenced and challenged. I am inspired by feminist theory, but I think of my feminist foremothers most directly as the women who went before me and tried to carve out a feminist practice in the middle of everything else: my grandmother who got a high school diploma with one of the first classes of girls to achieve that in Denmark, and who saw that her daughter got to go to medical school just like her brothers; my mother who worked most of her adult life as a therapist in mental health care and who would paint her nails at night before going into work, because she wanted to show her patients respect and did this by looking her best for them (this, to me, is lipstick feminism at its best!); her childless colleague (who later suffered a psychotic break herself) who doted on me and bought me records of my favorite Kid's Power punk-rock band, and who was the first to point out to me that I was a feminist at age ten; my music teacher, who told me not to mourn my abortion, because at six weeks it was "just a little piece of snot," and who lent me her Emma Goldman biography for consolation and inspiration. Emma Goldman *nota bene*, who said "if I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution!" — I think they all embodied that.

It's the same way with feminist art. Thankfully, there is more and more of it represented now in museums and biennials. *A Shrine for Girls*, by Patricia Cronin was one of the highlights for me at the 2015 Venice

Biennial—largely because it sparked a conversation with my daughter about what (intersectional) feminism is, and why we need it. Another great show I saw with her recently was Louise Bourgeois at the Louisiana Museum for Contemporary Art (my daughter totally nailed it with her suggestion that they sell plush spiders in the museum store to go with the show). I have been a fan of Pippilotti Rist, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Yoko Ono for many, many years. But a lot of the feminist art that has inspired me on the day-to-day of late has been brought to me through social media; Christen Clifford’s (sometimes graphic, always touching) ongoing account of her uterine cancer and its aftermath (#fuckcancer), Chiara No’s black metal ecofeminist crotch shots (#thisismyface), the endless stream of Instagram photos of #womensmarch today...I know social media is fucked up and selling ourselves back to ourselves, and all that, but there is also a platform here for us to speak truth to post-truth!

■ LOVELESS:

What you say here makes perfect sense to me when I think about my experiences in and with your *Motherism* installations. From my first encounter with your installation at *The Mothernists* (a DIY conference which took place in Rotterdam in 2015 co-organized by Deirdre M. Donogue), I felt galvanized in a way that I have begun to write about under the banner of “Critical Consciousness Raising.” Sitting inside the work, I felt invited to return to that important late 60s/early 70s practice, but with an added layer of historical reflection. I’m working in some current writing to sort this out with better language, but for now I would describe the experience as an invitation to gather politically and affectively, while reflecting on the practice of consciousness raising itself as an historical feminist strategy. Whether this is what you intended or not, it was a powerful aspect of the piece for me. And this is what led me to inviting you to install a large-scale iteration in Edmonton for the colloquium. I know you speak to this in your essay (published below), but could you, here, in short form, talk me through the genesis of the *Motherism* project? How did it start? Can you talk about some of the most successful and some of the most challenging venues?



■ BAGGESEN:

Motherism originated as my thesis project for my MA in Visual and Critical studies at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, from which I graduated in 2013. My thesis advisor, Michelle Grabner, who later became my publisher, invited me to show the installation at that year’s *Great Poor Farm Experiment* in Manawa, WI. The *Poor Farm* is literally just that, an old debtors’ farm out in rural Wisconsin, with 8000 square feet of exhibition space dedicated to a yearly show of contemporary art. The installation lived up there for its first year, while I was editing the book. As exhibition venues go, it is very primitive—no heating and such—and the installation took up a whole space in the basement, so it was very dank and clubby—which I like, by the way! One thing about the *Poor Farm* is that, since you have to travel quite far to get there, you also really take time with the work. So people would camp out in the tent, and listen to the whole audio (which is about an hour long) but they

would also just stay in there and make it their own — read the books in the “Leebrary,” drink wine, make out and so on. I got great feedback from that show, and it showed me what the piece could really become if I dared to go with the flow, and let the people make it what they need. So, you could say this first venue (outside of grad school) was both one of the most challenging and most successful; in a way that became the template for how the piece functioned from that moment onward. Like a good mama, *Motherism* hustles a lot, adapts to the needs of the places she visits, and she is not afraid of getting dirty.

■ **LOVELESS:**

Haha! So how many iterations have there been? Have any of them been “dirtier” than others?

■ **BAGGESEN:**

The installation has travelled to a number of venues (I believe it is eleven, by my last count) in Europe and North America, from artist run spaces to museums. One of the highlights was my solo show at The Contemporary Austin. In comparison with the *Poor Farm*, this was the “glamping” version of *Motherism*, complete with geodesic dome and purple carpet! For this occasion, TCA commissioned me to write and record *The Mothernist’s Audio Guide to Laguna Gloria*, a walking tour of the museum’s sculpture park, in which the *Mothernists’* signature mélange of art history, pop culture, politics, and music invites visitors to explore the historic site of Laguna Gloria in imaginative new ways. Another fun thing to do was my participation in the Elmhurst Art Museum Biennial, where I got to *Mothernize* a wing of their Mies van der Rohe house, accentuating the project’s relation with mid-century modernism, color field painting, and so on. I have also presented the project at a number of academic venues, most notably, of course, our “summit,” *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene* in Edmonton in 2016, where the installation served as the mother-ship for the conference and housed our presentations and discussions.

■ **LOVELESS:**

And I have to say that it, as I expected it to, really made the event. Being inside your installation reconfigured how we related to each other in

important ways. It was a treat, it was fun, and — most importantly — it de-familiarized the normal way we do conferences and share knowledge in the academy, and I think it is important to do that.

■ **BAGGESEN:**

I agree! And I look forward to doing it again. I just had a Skype conference with Deirdre Donoghue (of *M/other Voices* in Rotterdam) discussing how to “motherize” Copenhagen in the fall. This will be a follow up to *Mapping the Maternal*, and to *The Mothernists* — where you first encountered my work. The title for the Copenhagen summit will be *The Mothernists II: Who Cares for the 21st Century?* and will address care-work in the widest possible sense — from pain management, to child empowerment and agency, to climate change. We have very ambitious plans, so stay tuned!

■ **LOVELESS:**

Will do! One last thing before I let you go. You not only installed the installation for *Mapping the Maternal*, but you also presented something. Could you tell me about the text that you presented for *Mapping the Maternal* and how it links to your *Motherism* project?

■ **BAGGESEN:**

Since the inception of *Motherism*, the book and the installation have travelled together around the world and been presented in various academic and artistic contexts, for which I have continuously been writing new material to present and publish. In this sense, the text presented here doesn’t link to the project, it *is* the project, which is the breast that keeps on giving, i.e. keeps informing my research-based production, as it pertains to the link between maternal, curatorial, and artistic practice, and to care-work in the broadest possible sense, that of the future imaginary. ■



What follows was presented in part at [Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene](#) (University of Alberta, Canada, May 2016) and in part published under the title “the Revolution will be Motherized” (exhibition and live program collaborators 2015) by Vox Populi, Philadelphia (PA) 2015, on the occasion of Baggesen’s curatorial suite “3AM Maternal.” The two texts have been merged for this catalogue in order to present the [Motherism](#) project as part of a larger conversation about creative practice as care work (and vice versa). ■

KINDER KÜCHE KIRCHE BITTE!

by Lise Haller Baggesen

(Pardon me, if I'm sentimental)

The very last time I saw my granny alive, I knew this would be the very last time I would see my granny alive.

My paternal grandmother died one week after her 90th birthday in August 1998. She was alive for practically all of the 20th century. She lived to see two world wars, the atom bomb, the moon landing, the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Internet.

She was of the first generation of girls in Denmark to graduate high school; but already by the time she started 1st grade, Danish women had acquired the right to vote, and she would exercise that right for her entire adult life.

She mothered five children. When her second was born, about a year after her first, her mother (who had ten kids herself) told her to “take it easy.” Since she was an educated woman, and aware of contraceptive methods available, she did just that.

She never went to church, except for weddings and funerals, and occasionally for Christmas. She taught me not to pray, but to ask for what I needed.

When I needed an abortion at age 17, without me asking, she intuited I was also in need of moral support and sent me a box of bitter, dark chocolate. Way too adult for my taste, I ate them anyway – as a token to my now being “an adult” (I was not!).

The last time I saw her alive was the day after the birthday party, for which our entire family had gathered.

(Three-course dinner, wine *ad libitum*, tobacco passed around between meals, and a dance after; this is how we party in my family.)

I wonder what she was thinking at that birthday party, which she and everybody else knew would be her last?

Was she thinking about the laws of architecture? The temporary becomes permanent, the permanent becomes temporary, and nature always wins?

Was she thinking about the end of history?

Was she thinking of history as a pile of debris, or was she thinking of history as an angel being blown, backwards, into the future, by the winds of progress?

My granny had felt the winds of progress sweeping through her life. She was of a generation of women who rejected the axiom “*Kinder, Küche, Kirche* .”

This German phrase translates directly to “children, kitchen, church,” but its English equivalent would probably be “barefoot and pregnant.”

The slogan was adapted by Third Reich propaganda to catastrophic effect, but its origins remain vague; most often it is attributed to Empress Augusta Victoria.

According to the Westminster Gazette, in 1899, her husband – the last German Emperor, Willem II – lectured two visiting suffragettes thus:

*I agree with my wife. And do you know what she says? She says that women have no business interfering with anything outside the four K's. The four K's are – Kinder, Küche, Kirche, and Kleider: Children, Kitchen, Church, and Clothing.*¹

I imagine the visitors, replying in their best conversational German with a “Bitte!” – a versatile little word, which translates to “please!” Depending on your intonation it can mean anything you need it to mean – in this case an “Oh, please!” or, really: “Thanks, but no thanks!”

The caveat, off course, was that Kaiser Willem didn't really *mean* it – he never actually intended to assign women full responsibility for our collective educational, physical, and spiritual wellbeing!²

To really hand the “Kinder, Küche, Kirche” over to the authority of women would bring us close to what Anohni [best known as the former lead singer of *Antony and the Johnsons*] calls “Feminine Systems of Governance.”

On the live album *Cut the World*, Anohni gives a passionate speech, inviting an enthusiastic Copenhagen audience to imagine “Jesus as a girl, Allah as a woman, and the Buddha as a mother.”

This interest in the feminization of the deities stems from a growing concern for the wellbeing of our shared planet:

*I'm worried that the ecology of the world is collapsing and that I won't have anywhere to be reborn because I actually believe, like, where is any of us going? Where have any of us ever gone? We've come back here in some form. [...] I've been searching and searching for that little bit of my constitution that isn't of this place and I still haven't found it. Every atom of me, every element of me seems to resonate, seems to reflect the greater world around me.*³

Here, Anohni comes close to describing a relationship with the world, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in a note from 1960, calls the “Flesh of the World”:

*That means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world [...], and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world [...].*⁴

Whereas this might perhaps be of mainly philosophical interest to Merleau-Ponty, it has both ethical and spiritual implications for Anohni, who says:

*[...] if I'm not heading off to paradise elsewhere when I die, then I have more of a vested interest in observing a sustainable relationship with this place.*⁵

It should be self-evident that a “sustainable relationship with this place” involves a critical engagement with the challenges presented to us by the era of the Anthropocene (such as over-population, deforestation, climate change, and energy transition), as Anohni has also elaborated upon on her recent album *Hopelessness* – which is in fact anything but, instead engaging the listener in danceable and future-feminist protest songs.⁶

In my own experience, becoming a mother gives you a responsibility for your own little bundle of baby soft flesh of the world. Mothering, in the broader scheme of things, implies a physically vested relationship in the wellbeing of our world, for this and future generations.

It was this vested relationship – with the world at large, and the art world in particular – which moved me to put forward my ideas about

a project called *Motherism* to my MA thesis committee at the department of Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in the winter of 2012; a project called into existence with the purpose to “locate the mother shaped hole in contemporary art discourse.”

It was also at this first meeting that I boldly stated that “it has to be a tent!”

With this, together with the protest-chic banners of my female alter-ego protagonist Queen Leeba, I wished to stake out a space where we could have a conversation about mothering and its relation to artistic and curatorial practice. A conversation which was otherwise often shut down within the larger conversations occupying the VCS department – engaged with identity politics of feminist, queer, critical race, and art theory – but which I strongly felt pertained to all of them.

Traditionally, artists are a matro-phobic bunch, and Mother, still, by and large, a *persona non-grata* in the art world. While her body remains the site of libidinous fantasies of envy, gratitude, ridicule, sublimation, and downright abjection, rarely is she invited to speak on her own behalf, or from her own experience. Therefore, from the outset, the idea of the project was to create work, not “about” mothering but a work that worked “something like a mama” and spoke directly to her visitor in a maternal voice.

As *Motherism* continues to travel, it embodies Merleau-Ponty's idea of “the flesh of the world” by encroaching upon the places it visits, while in return being encroached upon by its visitors. In its various iterations – from dingy basements in rural Wisconsin and urban Rotterdam to the “Hi(gh) Motherism!” makeover of the Elmhurst Art Museum's Mies van der Rohe house (for the EAM Biennial 2015) to most recently serving as the “mothership” for the conference “Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene” at the University of Alberta – the installation has served as toddler-disco, conference room, lactation station, nail bar, chill lounge, and think-tank, as well as housing the “Leebrary”: the primary texts and audio recordings of the Motherism



thesis — a collection of epistolary essays (containing parental guidance on topics ranging from feminism, sex-positivism, and mysticism, to disco music and art politics) dedicated with a whole lotta love from one mother to her daughter.

Perhaps Julia Hendrickson evokes the combined effect and affect of the piece best, in her curatorial essay for The Contemporary Austin:

Baggesen's welcoming, multipurpose room also contains vibrant silk banners painted with political slogans and revisionist Color Field works — an homage to abstract pioneers such as Helen Frankenthaler, Hilma af Klint, and Kenneth Noland — as well as a rhizomic wall drawing in silver ink over a photographic image of Earth as seen from space. The effect of lying inside the tent, viewing our planet from the vantage point of the moon through a scrim of colorful flags, is otherworldly: Bowie's 1969 song "Space Oddity" comes to mind. Baggesen situates herself as an intermediary between the museum and the visitor, in that she offers up the environment she has created to be used by the public as the need arises. [...] Entering this space evokes the experience of stepping into a painting, [but] rather than solely addressing the figure in painting, Motherism challenges Greenbergian ideals of "flatness" by inviting the viewer into her painting-as-installation, a figure/ground relationship so upended as to become participatory, or relational. As art historian Claire Bishop argues, 'Participatory art demands that we find new ways of analyzing art that are no longer linked solely to visibility, even though form remains a crucial vessel for communicating meaning.' [...] As audio-installation, epistolary manifesto, and party-as-form, Motherism is one twenty-first-century feminist's affectionate call to arms.⁷

The show at The Austin Contemporary also included the "The Mothernist Audio Guide to Laguna Gloria" extending the experience into a walk in the surrounding park.

In addition to the growing body of artwork and writing, the touring project has also spawned various "daughter projects" such as the curatorial suite *3AM Maternal* for Philadelphia gallery Vox Populi, in the fall of 2014. Apart from *Motherism*, the series consisted of Assaf Evron and Nelly Agassi's electronic trance incubator NUMIMA and Chiara No's primal metal birthing scream *Crowning*.

Within the intimate confines of the "Fourth Wall" gallery's four walls, immersive interiors were created, linking directly to the visitor's own interior space, voice, and experience.

The three shows were united by a combination of musical, maternal, and magical thinking, and, different though they were, each related to the maternal, not so much through being "about" motherhood or parenting, as through a relation with what Bracha Ettinger names "The Matrixial Borderspace" — the internalized prenatal experience of the womb, which we all carry with us, and in which we relate to the (m)other and the outside world through her voice and movement — something (I would argue) we seek to return to through dance, trance, music, and rhythm, but also through the internal voice of literature and poetry, or through the fluidly extended "self" we encounter in the art experience.⁸

The feedback I consistently got when touring the show confirmed my hypothesis — which initially had inspired both my work and research for *Motherism* — namely that if we regard the "mother" not as the proverbial, smothering "enemy to good art," she can be a reparative source of creativity.⁹ This reparative relation is outlined, although often overlooked, in Melanie Klein's germinal psychoanalytical essay "Envy and Gratitude," as well as in Lou Andreas-Salomé's theories about a non-pathological narcissism, which she developed in parallel with her contemporary, colleague, and friend, Lucian Freud. Unfortunately, Freud's rather more phallic — or let's say penis-centric — theories of artistic production as sexual sublimation have since dominated our ideas of creative nature and production.

At its core, *Motherism* aims to challenge this one-way-traffic of artistic production and consumption — with the (active) artist at one end letting his creative juices flow freely and impregnating the (passive) viewer with his singular vision — instead introducing new "habits of mind" with our interrelation with art (and in turn with the broader world that artworks reflect and model). The knowledge that we ourselves are necessary for the artwork's (and hence the world's) completion aligns with Anohni's "vested relationship with this place," and, ultimately pushes the art-experience into the expanded field of education, therapy, and

care-work – traditionally taboo zones of modern art, but all the more reason to venture there.

As such, *Motherism* operates as what Irina Aristarkhova has dubbed a “caring machine” and unabashedly advocates the concept and experience of mothering in the greater cultural field, the politics and labor of the labor of love, and their uneasy position within the feminist and art discourse of the 21st century.¹⁰

Over the course of the 20th century (my grandmother’s century) women entered the workforce (and the art market) and thus the value system of research and production associated with this. Simultaneously, devaluation took place of “traditional” female care work – which was deemed “unprofessional.” Decisions regarding childbearing and -rearing were relegated to the private sphere, their political (and artistic) potential unrealized.

But as long as western feminism skirts around an issue – which, in one way or other, affects much of the world’s female population – by cutting it down to a question of “destiny” vs. “choice,” we may have come a long way, baby, but we are not there yet. Or, as Anne Marie Slaughter recently pointed out in her book *Unfinished Business*, “[y]ou can’t have a halfway revolution!”¹¹

Self-proclaimed anti-capitalist psychonaut sorceress Johanna Hedva takes it one step further in her “Sick Woman Theory,” where she concludes:

*The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. To take seriously each other’s vulnerability and fragility and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it. To protect each other, to enact and practice community. A radical kinship, and interdependent sociality, a politics of care.*¹²

Ellis Island – a historical entry point to the United States, the largest colonial capitalist economy in the world – is guarded by the Statue of Liberty.

On her foundation is inscribed the famous poem *The New Colossus*, by Emma Lazarus. In this sonnet Lady Liberty is celebrated as: “A mighty woman with a torch, the Mother of Exiles,” who proclaims “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

This, the care work of liberation, is the foundation of all our liberties.

All. Our. Liberties.

Perhaps the radical stance for the 21st century would be to claim these liberties, to reevaluate our value systems, and to say “Kinder, Küche, Kirche, Bitte!”

Yes Please! Please hand over the keys of our educational, physical and spiritual wellbeing to “female systems of governance.” Or better yet: this key must be fashioned by ourselves. As you may or may not know, the German word for “art” is “Kunst.” Another K-word which, in my opinion, feminists and mothers alike (and feminist mothers in particular), would be well advised to meddle with, not just for art’s sake, but for the world’s.

If we want an (art) world in which we all (and not only the multi-billionaires among us) will “Keep on Rocking in the Free World,” we may need to think (m)otherwise about the rigid structures (golden skyscrapers etc.) we have been building hitherto.¹³

In my view, these must be infused with a maternal vitality, a regenerative power, that will allow us to think of our collective creative practice as a limitless expansion “flinging ourselves beyond the ego” (to quote Cixous).¹⁴ We need to think ourselves out of the white cube and all the way back into the womb, from where future generations of artists will grow:

The Revolution Will Be Motherized! ■



FOOTNOTES

- ¹ The American Lady and the Kaiser. The Empress's four K's, *Westminster Gazette*, 17. 8. 1899, S. 6. The fourth K, being clothing, was later left out as the idiom became popularized by, amongst others, Third Reich propaganda.
- ² This idea, that he didn't really *mean it*, is not entirely new, and not entirely original either. To the best of my knowledge it was first entertained by Karen Blixen in her (in)famous "En Baaltale Med 14 Aars Forsinkelse" (trnsl: "A Bonfire Speech With 14 Year's Delay") from 1952, in which she uses this thought experiment to argue that the feminist struggle is a more or less lost cause. Let's just say that I agree to disagree with Ms. Blixen, and that I have chosen to take her argument in another direction for the purpose of this essay. For the Danish speakers among the readers, a recording of the original speech can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOBgeqz8jRO> (last accessed May 17, 2017).
- ³ Antony and the Johnsons "Future Feminism" *Cut the World* (Rough Trade, 2012).
- ⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968) p.248.
- ⁵ Antony and the Johnsons "Future Feminism" *Cut the World* (Rough Trade, 2012).
- ⁶ Anohni, *Hopelessness* (Secretly Canadian, 2016).
- ⁷ Julia Hendrickson: *Lise Haller Baggesen: Motherism Gallery Guide*, Laguna Gloria Gate House Gallery (Austin: The Contemporary Austin, 2016).
<http://www.thecontemporaryaustin.org/exhibitions/lise-haller-baggesen-motherism/>
Quoted: Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 7.
- ⁸ Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
- ⁹ This formulation comes from Cyril Connolly, who, in his 1938 *Enemies of Promise* wrote "There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall" (p.116).
- ¹⁰ Irina Aristarkhova uses this term in her *Hospitality of the Matrix: Philosophy, Biomedicine, and Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2012), but also used it in person at the *Mapping the Maternal* colloquium to describe the installation.
- ¹¹ Anne Marie Slaughter *Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family* (New York: Random House, 2015).
- ¹² Johanna Hedva: "Sick Woman Theory," *Mask: The Not Again Issue*,
<http://www.maskmagazine.com> (last accessed May 17, 2017).
- ¹³ I take the term "(m)otherwise" from Andrea Liss's *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- ¹⁴ Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" *Signs* 1, no. 4. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

LISE HALLER BAGGESEN left her native Denmark in 1992 to study painting at the AKI in Enschede and the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. She is a recipient of *Prins Bernhard's Prize* (2000) and the *Royal Award for Modern Painting* (2003). She completed her MA in Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute in 2013, with a *SAIC VCS Fellowship Award*. In 2015 she was nominated for *The Joan Mitchell Foundation's Emerging Artist Grant*, and in 2017 she was a resident at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in Alberta, Canada.

She is also the author of *Motherism* (2014), and co-organizer of *The Mothernists*, in Rotterdam (2015). *The Mothernists 2: Who Cares for the 21st Century*, took place at ANA and at the Royal Academy for Fine Art in Copenhagen in fall 2017.

She has exhibited internationally, including Threewalls, Jane Addams Hull House Museum, Poetry Foundation, MCA, and 6018 North (IL); Poor Farm and the Suburban (WI), The Contemporary Austin (TX), EFA and A.I.R. Gallery (NY); *Overgaden* (DK), *Württembergischem Kunstverein* (D), MoMu Antwerpen (B), and *Théâtre de la Ville de Paris* and *Le Confort Moderne* (F).



NATALIE S. LOVELESS is a Canadian conceptual artist, curator, writer, and assistant professor of contemporary art history and theory in the Department of Art and Design at the University of Alberta, where she specializes in feminist and performance art history, art as social practice and artistic research methodologies (research-creation).

Loveless has lectured and written extensively on research-creation as a critical intervention in the contemporary North American academy and has worked to strengthen research-creation cultures at the University of Alberta as director of the *Research-Creation and Social Justice CoLABoratory* (www.researchcreation.ca), a unit that brings together faculty from Arts, Education, Native Studies, and Physical Education and Recreation, funded by the Kule Institute for Advanced Study (KIAS).

Her new project, *Sensing the Anthropocene: Attunement in an Age of Urgency*, asks how different performance-based modalities, such as deep listening, soundwalking, or durational performance, might attune us differently within what is contestedly called the Anthropocene today.





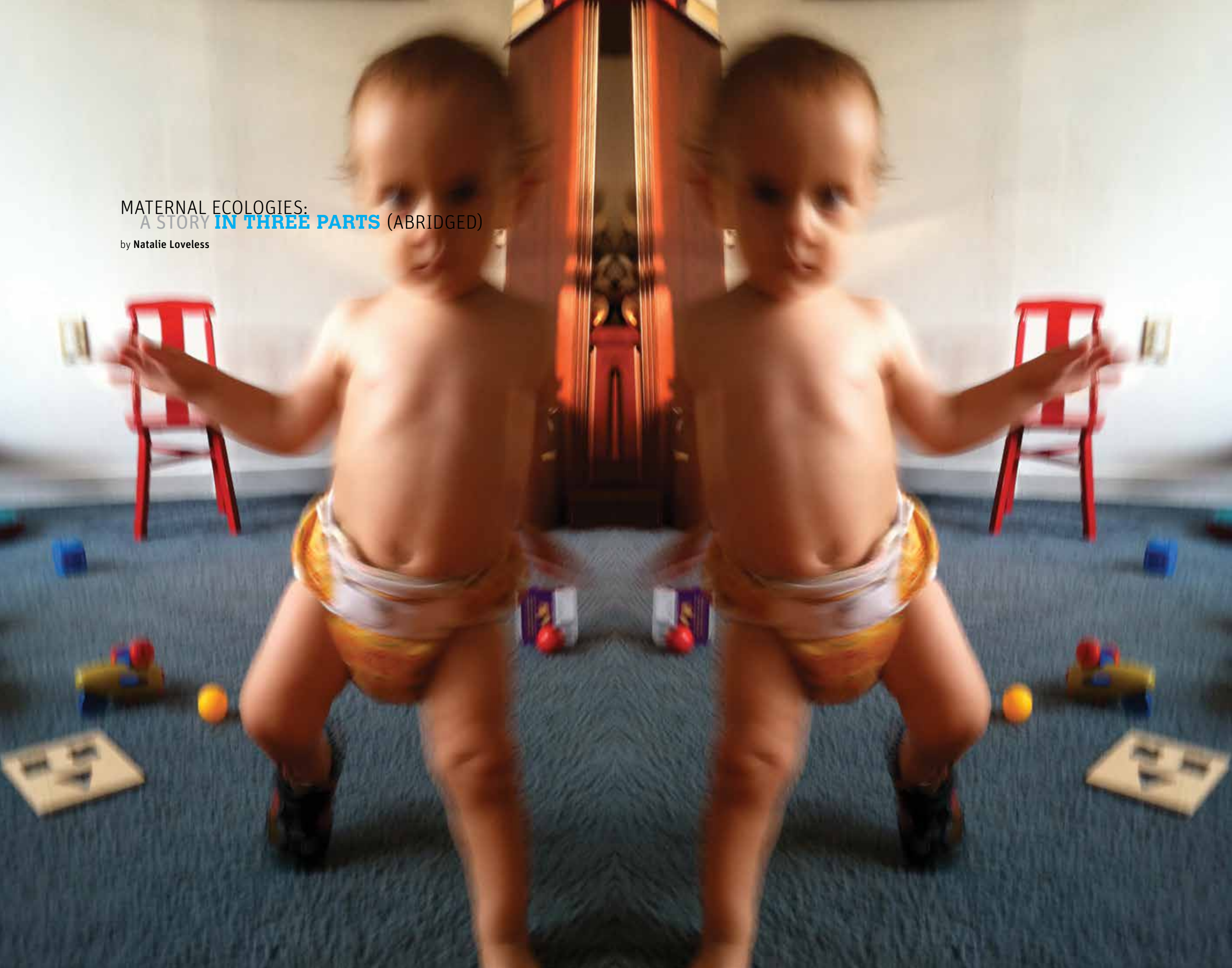
For the 2016 exhibition **New Maternalisms Redux** curator Natalie S. Loveless developed a “curatorial room” through which viewers had to pass in order to enter the exhibition proper. This room included text, image, and video documentation of **An Action A Day: Maternal Ecologies (2010–2013)**, a three-year daily-practice project in which Loveless took her daily experience of the maternal and worked with it as an artistic and intellectual research site.⁴

Rather than present the video and image documentation of **Maternal Ecologies** as an artwork-proper, it was separated from the rest of the exhibition and offered as example of the artistic research that formed the basis of the **New Maternalisms** exhibition series (2012, 2014, 2016).

The following, reprinted from Amber Kinser, Kryn Freehling-Burton, and Terri Hawkes (eds.), **Performing Motherhood: Artistic, Activist, and Everyday Enactments**, Demeter Press (2014), describes the project, and has been updated and shortened for this context. ■

MATERNAL ECOLOGIES:
A STORY **IN THREE PARTS** (ABRIDGED)

by Natalie Loveless



MATERNAL ECOLOGIES: A STORY **IN THREE PARTS** (ABRIDGED)

by **Natalie Loveless**

...[A]n idea always exists as engaged in a matter, that is as “matter ing”.... As a result a problem is always a practical problem, never a universal problem mattering for everybody. Problems of the ecology of practices are also practical problems in this strong sense, that is problems for practitioners.

—Isabelle Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices”²

On August 1, 2010, when my first and only child turned three months old, I began what I thought would be a three-month, daily-practice, art project.³ Before I knew it, three months had turned into three years. Organized at the intersection of feminist politics and performance art, the project emerged from my need to find new ways understanding my daily experience as an artist-mother-theorist working in the academy who found herself both unwilling and unable to separate her status as mother from her status as artist and academic.

Like many feminist artist-mothers before me, I began *Maternal Ecologies* in the wake of my experience of new motherhood, and the specific ways that the experience affected and reshaped my everyday. While being a new mother is intense for everyone, it is intense for each of us differently. In my case, my son was born two months prematurely, at just over four pounds. He lived the first month of his life in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. It was excruciating. My partner and I were with our son, skin-to-skin, every day, and sent home each night.

As expected, during this time and the months that followed, my academic-artistic life—a life characterized by a swath of intellectual and creative activities like going to art openings, writing papers, participating in art festivals, and attending academic conferences—changed. There was little time to read or write or make, and my participation in public events dwindled. While I was prepared for much of this, still, in my attempt to create “work-life-balance,” I found myself on the receiving end of what I can only characterize as a poverty of options.

Despite the advantages of decades of feminist intervention in the professional sphere, I was asked more than once to leave the baby at home as a precondition of academic and/or artistic participation. This, more often than not, meant that I had to opt out. However, rather than my

forced absence being seen as a structural problem, it was characterized as a result of my individual choice to procreate.⁴ I tried to be creative, but even simple solutions, such as my partner and I taking turns at conferences between attending panels and wandering about with the baby, were often met with stern glances. I remember one particular symposium at NYU (at which I was presenting) during which, upon seeing me in the foyer with my son, a newly minted faculty member commented to me that she would never bring her child to work, even to visit, as she had been told in no uncertain terms that to do so would tarnish her professional status in the eyes of her colleagues and students, and possibly impact her tenure-ability. Frustrated by my experiences and stories like these, I developed *Maternal Ecologies* and the *New Maternalisms* curatorial series as a reminder of the historical insistence on maternal invisibility in both art and academia that precede, and can inform, feminist artistic activism in the present moment (see, for instance, Bee and Schor).⁵

I suspect that my generation of artist and/or academic parents—many of whom are the children of 70s and 80s feminism—often find themselves at a loss, as the promises and insights of decades of feminist activism fail to translate into a satisfying, creative, and capacious-enough integration of career and family-life. And, while isolation may well be a common characteristic of all early-parenting labour within nuclear-family structures, the professional needs of academic life and certain forms of artistic practice (for example, performance art) compound this isolation through the compulsory geographic mobility needed to secure permanent academic work (or to curate and perform in festivals). In response to these conditions, the performance practice that I developed relied heavily on social and mobile media to reconfigure my experience of everyday maternal life.⁶

PART 1: Action A Day (Maternal Prescriptions)

For the first part of *Maternal Ecologies*, “Action A Day (Maternal Prescriptions),” I invited five mothers from three countries (the us, the uk, and Canada) and four cities (Boston, New York City, Cardiff, and Montreal), also with young children, to “perform” an action with me every day.



figure 1 | Natalie Loveless | *Action A Day (Maternal Prescriptions)*, 01.08.10 – 23.10.10

The process was as follows: I would choose one moment or action, every day, and, using the Fluxus-inspired format of the instruction piece, restructure and reflect on these daily maternal labours and affects. For eighty-four days in a row, I sent a “prescription” to my collaborators to witness (and to perform for themselves). My collaborators were then invited to send me “performance scores” from their daily lives for my son and I to perform.⁷ While I posted a “maternal prescription” every day and performed all of the instruction-scores sent to me, my collaborators were free to pick and choose when and how they would participate. This meant that on some days my son and I performed alone together, while on others we had three or four actions to perform.⁸

On one particularly difficult day, I noticed that my son stopped crying every time I flushed the toilet. I crafted an instruction from this experience (“*developing coping mechanisms: discover how flushing the toilet can stop a scream*”) and sent it to my collaborators to perform with their children, if they wished (figs 1 & 2). This simple action reframed a moment of maternal life (negotiating a crying infant) and presented it as a moment of shared experience and of shared research. While each collaborator, with their differently-aged and situated children, was invited to perform an action that was specific to me and my son’s experience, I was offered an opportunity to perform their actions with my son. Performing the action of a two-year-old walking-child with my two-month-premature two-month-old, defamiliarized the developmental specificities of my daily life with my son; it also situated me (affectively) as an ally in someone else’s daily negotiations. It made me feel connected. Less alone. More playful. These collaborative participatory exchanges recontextualized the isolation of my early maternal experience and encouraged reflection, as we moved through that first year of the project, not only on the ways that my child was developing but the ways that *I* was developing (*becoming-mother*, as it were) relationally with my child, my collaborators, and with their children.

PART 2: Action A Day (Documenting Firsts)

In my second year of mothering, I found myself entangled in a narrative of “firsts”—my son’s first steps, first words, first view of the NYC skyline, first time saying “uh-oh” and pointing to something he’d dropped. So on one of the big “firsts”—his first birthday—I began the second chapter of *Maternal Ecologies*, “Action A Day (Documenting Firsts).” “Documenting Firsts” involved identifying a “first” every day for 210 days, taking a photograph of that “first,” and then reflecting on the world of reference or meaning or affect that this “first” was drawing me into.

While critical of the language of firsts, I also found myself poignantly aware of the fragile and delicious newness of so many moments of our daily life together. His first cold: bacteria colonizing his gut. His first word: a step towards independence from my uncanny ability to

figure 2 | Natalie Loveless | *Action A Day (Maternal Prescriptions)*, 01.08.10 – 23.10.10



translate his every micro-gesture and grunt. That year was a dazzling and exhausting dance with the “new,” both for him and for me. With a nod to Heraclitus, paying attention to his (our) firsts was a way of seeing firsts everywhere and in everything, and became a knowledge-making project as much about the world as about us.⁹

PART 3: *Action A Day (Gone/There)*

For part three, “Action A Day (Gone/There),” my son and I documented my departures and arrivals over the last trimester of his second year of life and my first year of working full-time outside the home; the project ended on his third birthday (fig 3).

This last year of the project was characterized by growing individuation. Despite the fact that I was still producing milk and feeding him with it,

the connection felt nothing like it had. Nursing now felt like something waiting to be over. My body had adjusted such that my breasts were never engorged—whether I was gone for a day on campus without pumping, or away for a week at a conference.

Whereas, in the early years, nursing was characterized by urgent internal mammary pressure and the release/relief of Orion’s suckle, towards the end of this third year I had to grab and squirt just to assure myself that there was, in fact, still milk and that my son was not just sucking skin. In the weeks leading up to “Gone/There,” I wrote the following in an email to a fellow mother:

My breasts are largely limp and his suck chafes as much as it warms. The act of nursing, once a bond of ridiculous intimacy and immediacy seems mundane.

It is a practice that feels like it has outlived its need and that will, no doubt, disappear before long. I will miss the unique bio-psycho-social connection that nursing has been for us, but he is stepping into such serious individuality these days—sometimes reaching new heights on a daily basis. Only last month he started using the indexical “I” to refer to himself for the first time (rather than the previous third person: “Orion wants...”). He spends time on his own, refers to himself eloquently, and has a rich internal life that he communicates endearingly (“You want to pick me up because I love you mama”). He wants me, but, in many of the previous senses, doesn’t need me: he can walk on his own, eat on his own, and communicate his needs in ways that others understand. (Loveless, personal email, February 26, 2013).

It was this manifest shift from *need* to *want* that inaugurated the last part of the project. He no longer wore diapers, no longer nursed very much (he would be done completely, of his own volition, within just a few more months), he no longer had to be carried quite as much, and he was no longer as incomprehensible to other adults. With these changes in my son, and to his claim on my body, came necessary changes to my formal/structural choices for the project. Whereas the first two “chapters” were performed in the context of a body still variably tied like an appendage to mine—his movement and communication so very dependent on my proximity and physical intervention—in this third year we could no longer relate to each other in this way, try as I might in moments of nostalgia. Responsive to this new structure of relating, I handed *him* the technology with the invitation to document, in video, our departures and reunions.

Over the course of the last three months of the project I watched him develop a relationship with my smartphone, using it as a transitional object. I would offer him the device every day as I left for work and would say my goodbyes while he held it, pointing the camera lens in whatever direction he pleased. Similarly, every day when I returned, I took out the phone and handed it to him, asking him about his day as he videotaped our interaction. Some days, I would hand him the phone without incident; others he would refuse, knowing what was to come. Towards the end of the project he would grab the phone from me when

figure 3 | Natalie Loveless | *Action A Day (Gone/There)*, 17.01.17 – 09.05.17



he saw that it was time, perform the ritual almost without me, and then turn back to whatever (toy, book, game) he had been engaged in.

Each of the three “chapters” of *Maternal Ecologies* focused my attention within an aesthetic, performative, and political frame. To use Isabelle Stengers’ language, each “vectorized” my concrete experience, orienting me in new ways and pulling me into new worlds of possibility.¹⁰ It did this specifically through the performance-discipline of daily-practice instruction scores. These scores anchored my attention and, as with all daily practices, re-sculpted the texture of daily life, focussing attention and value on labour that might otherwise go unnoticed. ■

FOOTNOTES

¹ www.maternalecologies.ca

² Stengers, Isabelle. "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices." *Cultural Studies Review* 11.1 (2005): 183–196.

³ I was specifically influenced by Fluxus instruction works and Art/Life daily practice projects such as those pioneered by the artist Linda Montano. An amorphous mid-20th-century collective art movement, Fluxus worked to recast the everyday, bringing conceptualism's focus on "art as idea" together with a turn to "art and life," indebted, amongst other things, to feminist theory and activism. I was also, of course, influenced by Mary Kelly's germinal *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1979). I write in detail about *Post-Partum Document* in "Maternal Mattering: The Performance and Politics of the Maternal in Contemporary Art" forthcoming in Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena Buszek (eds.) *The Companion to Feminist Theory and Practice* (Wiley-Blackwell).

⁴ It is for this reason that when Dr. Sheena Wilson and I organized the colloquium *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene* in 2016 we explicitly created conditions that were designed to be supportive to parent-participants, including a play area in the colloquium space, funds to pay for extra plane tickets for children attending the event with their parent, an offer of day-care on site, and a child-care subsidy for participants wanting to leave the children at home but needing financial support to pay for childcare. None of this could be officially claimed and was thus offered as increased honorarium for participation.

⁵ Bee, Susan and Mira Schor, eds. "Forum: On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie." *m/e/a/n/i/n/g # 12* (November 1992): 3–42.

⁶ Each year of the project was configured not only by the different developmental stages that characterize those early years, but also by different labour conditions. Part One, "Action A Day (Maternal Prescriptions)," lasted for three months and was performed during the last year of my life as a doctoral student, as I finalized and submitted my dissertation. Part Two, "Action A Day (Documenting Firsts)," was 210 days long (my best approximation of the number of days that Orion was *in utero*). During this second year, I worked part time, as a visiting assistant professor in a different city and country to that in which I had done my dissertation. And, in part three, "An Action A Day (Gone/There)," I worked with my son for three months to document my daily departures and returns as I left for and returned from my first tenure-track job at a university in yet a third province and city.

⁷ My collaborators for this first year of the project were my son, Orion Loveless LaBare; Alex Metral and her son Huxley Alder Metral; Shannon Coyle and her daughter Zetta Coyle Rašović; Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and her daughter Alba Puig de la Bellacasa; Krista Lynes and her son Xavier Emmanuel Lynes Weiss; and Dillon Paul and her daughter Maeve Paul. The participating children were, respectively, three months old, five months old, seven months old, eight months old, twelve months old, and thirteen months old at the start. All names included by permission.

⁸ See artist book documenting the actions, available for download on www.maternalecologies.ca.

⁹ "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man." Plato. *Cratylus*. Trans. B. Jowett. *The Internet Classics Archive*. Web Atomic and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 13 Sept. 2007 (402A).

¹⁰ I take this term from Isabelle Stengers's essay "A Constructivist Reading of *Process and Reality*" (*Theory, Culture, Society*, 25: 4, (2008), 91–110).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For being my partner in crime, as well as an inspiring co-parent, I owe the deepest debt to Sha LaBare. I would also like to thank Alex Metral, Shannon Coyle, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Krista Lynes, Dillon Paul for their partnership and participation in the first year of *Maternal Ecologies*; Amber Kinser, Kryn Freehling-Burton, and Terri Hawkes, for their help in crafting the original version of this essay, which was based on talks given at *Signal: A Symposium on Art, Network, and Technology*, organized by Julie Bacon, hosted by *La Chambre Blanche* (Quebec City, October 30–November 2, 2012), *In the Presence of Absence*, the 4th International Biennial of Performance Deformes, curated by Perpetua Rodriguez (the Museum of Contemporary Art MAC Valdivia, Chile, November 19–25, 2012), and the *Complicated Labors* symposium, organized by Irene Lusztig and Micah Perks (University of California, Santa Cruz, February 5, 2014).



A CONVERSATION
WITH NATALIE LOVELESS

An interview by Lise Haller Baggesen



A CONVERSATION WITH NATALIE LOVELESS

An interview by **Lise Haller Baggesen**

What follows is an interview between Lise Haller Baggesen and Natalie S. Loveless, discussing the relationship between Maternal Ecologies and New Maternalisms, and highlighting some of the central issues that arise in the text, the project, and the exhibition series as a whole.

■ BAGGESEN:

I would like to go back to the infancy of *New Maternalisms*. In a discussion between yourself and Jennie Klein from July 2014 (quoted in the NM-Chile catalogue), you describe how you came up with the idea for the exhibition in 2014 “soon after the birth of my son.” Later you describe how you “felt [...] that there is something very specific to the intensity of the care-work (the affect and labour) in the very first years of mothering.” Now that you have spent the last seven years of your life in the company both of your son and of this exhibition series, how have your thoughts evolved around this?

■ LOVELESS:

Well...for one, while some of what I first wrote (about the role of interruption and responsivity in maternal life) is still relevant to mothering a seven-year-old, what I experience now is nothing compared to the intensity of labour during my son’s first few years, which I think was especially fraught given his prematurity. There was something specific to the care required in those years—something very specific about the bodily relations and undoings that I experienced—that it seemed important to focus on. This may be because I approached the practice of motherhood, specifically in those early years, from the perspective of a body-based performance artist. The thought that I could gestate a human, push it out of my vagina, and then feed it from my breasts fascinated me. In other words, I went into pregnancy as an artist and a researcher, curious and eager to experience what my body could do, feel, and be to another.

The intensity of care really took my body over during those early years. And this experience interested me practically and conceptually. It altered who and how I could be in the world. It “sculpted” me. And the performance artist in me was fascinated. The specificity of being pulled at and sucked at and hung on, of being turned into a twenty-





four-hour-food-and-transport-and-safety-machine, as well as being one of my son's primary translation devices during those years, caught my interest intellectually and affectively. And still does.

■ **BAGGESEN:**

Could I ask a short follow up question? Given the intensity that you describe, how has your work with the exhibition influenced your own "performance of motherhood" and vice versa?

■ **LOVELESS:**

Actually, I don't think that the exhibitions themselves (*New Maternalisms* 2012; *New Maternalisms Chile* 2014; *New Maternalisms Redux* 2016) have much impacted my daily experience of mothering. But I think that there was an influence in the other direction: the artistic research that I performed during the three years of *Maternal Ecologies* taught me something that has remained steadfastly at the core of my research, curatorial work, and scholarship. It put care-work front and center for me as a political act. *Maternal Ecologies* was, for me, a deeply situated artistic-research experiment that took my daily practice of maternal life and worked to render it public and political in ways that I think have changed me as an artist, a scholar, and as a teacher.

■ **BAGGESEN:**

This is in line with the genesis of my own *Mothenism* project. I originally framed my research question for my MA Visual Cultural Studies

thesis quite theoretically. I proposed to "explore the perceived schism, as well as the overlap, between mothering and artistic and curatorial practice." Etymologically, the word "curate" springs from "cura" the latin work for "care." I see in your work with *New Maternalisms* (and more recently with the colloquium that you organized with Sheena Wilson last year, *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics and the Anthropocene*) an approach to curating that branches out from the realm of the maternal, into the art world and beyond, and functions as an act of radical care work. Would you like to speak more to that?

■ **LOVELESS:**

Yes! I actually speak to this in some detail in a forthcoming essay on maternal art and politics.¹ Towards the end of the essay I write: "Global ecological and economic collapse are discussed with alarming regularity in the newspapers and news-feeds that surround us, and there are no clear answers for how to move forward unless, perhaps, we take seriously a politics and ethics of care, and especially care as *intra-action*, care that *makes and remakes* us rather than care as something we do *to or for* others." We live in a world in which care practices are deeply undervalued, and, even when they are valued, too-often life is structured in such a way that there is (or seems to be) *no time* to really inhabit care as an ethics of being in-and-with-and-as the world. I don't think we have many good tools for this. While she doesn't work specifically on care or the maternal, my colleague here at the University of Alberta,

Kim TallBear, has been inspiring me in this realm with her work on indigenous kinship networks and challenges to settler-normativities.

■ **BAGGESEN:**

You mention Kim TallBear, whom I remember vividly and fondly from our presentations at *Mapping the Maternal*. Her emphasis on kinship networks reminds me of Haraway's slogan "make kin, not babies!"

I am not sure I can get totally on board with this, because for me it still reeks a little of second-wave, and later queer-feminist, theorists (and practitioners) who would all too happily reject childbearing and -rearing as a sentimental and demeaning pursuit, best left to the "breeders" who didn't know better.

However, I do really like Haraway's invocation of the "seventh generation principle" as a careful consideration of how we must "stay with the trouble" while maintaining longstanding interpersonal (and inter-species) relationships here in the era of the capitalocene, and consider how to make our imprint as slight and impermanent as possible going

forward (Haraway 2016). I know that you have studied with Haraway, and that much of your new research, including your work with Dr. Wilson on *Mapping the Maternal*, revolves around the problematics of care work, sustainability, and energy transition, as shared responsibilities in the era of the Anthropocene. How do these two sensibilities—the political responsibility (to make kin, not babies)—gel with the personal desire (to have babies) in your academic and daily practice?

■ **LOVELESS:**

I actually use that Haraway quote ("So, Make Kin, Not Babies! It matters how kin generate kin.") as one of the epigraphs for the essay that I just mentioned ("Maternal Mattering"). The first time I saw the slogan, it was as a mini-poster for a panel presentation at the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S) conference in 2015 that Haraway organized.² Honestly, my first instinct when I read the slogan was, like you, to pause and wonder what its implications might be for my research on the maternal (and practice as a mother)!

As a point of record, not one but two of my intellectual mentors have published works that explicitly speak out against making human babies as a wholesale "good" (the other is Lee Edelman, whose *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* has been taken as anti-natalist in the strongest of ways). Maybe because of their influence, while I have spent the better part of seven years working on, with, and through the maternal in my artistic and academic research, I don't consider myself a pro-natalist at all. I will completely understand if people look at me skeptically for saying this, but I consider my research on the maternal to work in tandem with both Haraway's and Edelman's arguments.

Let me explain what I mean by using Edelman to help unpack my reading of Haraway. Edelman's polemic points out the ideological and material violences that are perpetrated in the name of the Child in late 20th-/early 21st-century US American political culture. Notice that I (following Edelman) capitalize "Child." In order to understand where Edelman is coming from, it is important to understand that this is a Lacanian move. The Child, in Edelman's intellectual universe, is, like



the Woman and the Phallus and the Other in Lacan—a symbolic figure that comes to organize certain people materially, within the social order, in certain ways, but that is not reducible to any of the individuals so organized. What Edelman writes so polemically in his text (as I reference in my introduction to this volume) is:

Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Ls and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop. (Edelman 2004).

When Edelman writes this, he is not saying “fuck your son, Natalie.” He is saying: take heed of the logics of reproductive futurity and the uses to which the figure of the child is put; take heed of the many violences that are perpetrated under the sign of pro-natalism and a futurity that is specifically *not* organized in service of a “seventh generation.” Pro-natalist reproductive futurity, in Edelman’s idiom, is the engine of White Capitalist Heterosexist Colonial Patriarchy. It produces more of that specific “same” that has led us to many of the pressing ecological and political problems that we now face.

I read Haraway in much the same light as I read Edelman. Haraway is not looking at me and castigating me for producing a small human mammal, she is asking us *all* to think much more carefully about (riffing on her well-known re-workings of Marilyn Strathern) *how kin generate kin*. Kin here *can* include the making of humans, but it is not reducible to that, and, in fact, demands that we do so differently than we have been. This is why the footnote that comes with the slogan at it appears in *Staying with the Trouble* really matters to how we understand her argument. In that footnote Haraway points to the projected number of humans expected to be alive in 2100 (11.2 billion—compare this to 3.7 in 1970 and 6 in 2010) and asks the following:

What if [it] were to become a cultural expectation that every new child have at least three lifetime committed parents (who are not necessarily each other's lovers and who would birth no more new babies after that, although they might live in multichild, multigenerational households)?²

It is a suggestion that I take seriously. And it is one that is at the heart of all of my work on the maternal. While it is only in recent years that I have been explicitly writing and publishing on topics related to the so-called Anthropocene,⁴ this perspective (working with the maternal in the mode of “no future”) informed the *New Maternalisms* curatorial project and the *Maternal Ecologies* daily practice project since its inception—I presented on the intersection of Edelman’s work and Bracha Ettinger’s, specifically thinking through how to think through the maternal “non-repro-normatively,” at the University of Toronto in 2010 when Orion was just a slip of a thing and I was in my first year of *Maternal Ecologies!*⁵

Haraway and Edelman are each, in different ways, saying: beware “repro-normativity” and all the uses to which it is put. We can’t keep producing humans at this rate, we can’t keep doing the family the way we have been doing it, and we can’t keep ignoring the now while fixating on a future in which everything will somehow all work out in a feat of technophilic heroism.





The fight needs to come from all sides — it needs to come from those of us who do breed humans and who think critically and carefully about the maternal not only as an act of species reproduction, but as an ethics. Maternal ethics, beautifully and differentially theorized by so many, is not just about extrapolating from the material enmeshment of bodies, affects, and labour in the living of maternal life, but it is also about denaturalizing presumptions surrounding what it means to make human babies according to mono-normative, nuclear, individualized ways of parenting.⁶ As Haraway suggests, what if we made fewer babies and shared them better? What then? What if we started taking seriously our multispecies status and stopped seeing only other humans as kin?⁷ We might then start thinking more carefully and *creatively*. Anyway, long story long, this is how Haraway’s “Make Kin, Not Babies” gels with my artistic and academic work on the maternal. Ha! You really got me going there! Did I even answer your question?

■ **BAGGESEN:**

Yes, and I hear what you are saying, but I still find Edelman’s rhetorical move problematic. Symbolic and actual women and children have been taken hostage in the name of all sorts of crimes against humanity, but they are also drivers of anti-capitalist resistance as for example in the protests at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipe Line (DAPL) where Indigenous activists and allies rallied to secure not only the symbolic sanctity of the Land, but also the very real right to clean drinking water for their very real children for generations to come.

I am not very familiar with Edelman’s work, I might add, but I am a fan of Maya Angelou’s truism “[w]hen people show you who they are the first time, believe them,” and I have a hard time reading your quote from his book in this context without him emerging as (in Maggie Nelson’s words) “[...] the specter of what Susan Fraiman has described as ‘a heroic gay male sexuality as stand-in for queerness which remains unpolluted by procreative femininity’.”⁸ It was exactly in response to this type of queer theory that I started writing *Mothenism*, as I feel it robs us of our (quite specific) *Maternal Jouissance* (which, in my understanding, is also what you talk about earlier on in this interview, with your description of how you were driven to motherhood as a perfor-

mance artist wanting to test the physical limits of their body). Opposite Haraway, who accepts (and, I believe, embraces) our messy, polluted, hot bed of desires, I still believe Edelman’s position is barren and a dead end (pun intended), but we can agree to differ on that.

On the topic of *Maternal Jouissance*, I have been thinking—and I guess this refers back to the beginning of our conversation—what if, in addition to a Sex (or Life) Drive and Death Drive, we might also propose a Care Drive? Given the toxic fallout of (among others) the Brexit and the 2016 elections cycle and the deep rifts it has produced on the Left, I think we have to embrace our Care Drive, and seriously have to ask ourselves (with Mierle Laderman Ukeles) “After the Revolution, Who is going to take out the trash on Monday Morning?”⁹ I am quite sincere about this; what if, instead of ridiculing and downplaying the “maternal instinct,” we took what it means to “gestate another human being and

▼ *New Maternalisms: Redux* keynote address by Griselda Pollock at the AGA





push it out of our vagina” much more seriously (understanding that this would apply equally to non-vaginal birthing—I am just drawing on your formulation in this context)? A human being, who, *nota bene* and by way of microchimerism, has been polluting your central nervous system with its own DNA, and pushing all your tender buttons from the inside. And, importantly, what if this “Care Drive” were not only triggered by biological heritage but extended beyond one’s own gene pool? While what I am calling the “Care Drive,” here, like the Sex and Death Drive, gets fetishized and perverted, exploited and appropriated, within our neo-liberal and capitalist paradigm, that does not mean that it suffices to say “fuck it!”

■ **LOVELESS:**

I take your words to heart. I do. But I think that there is room for both “fucks” (angry and desirous) and “cares” (needed and offered). Both are necessary, and both have their place (I am specifically thinking here of Audre Lorde’s moving work on the uses of anger¹⁰), and both have been at the core of *New Maternalisms* and *Maternal Ecologies* from the get-go. I have had moments where I have needed to cry out in protest, and moments where I have worked to create spaces of generosity and care. The research was never just about the maternal for me, but, rather, the maternal was a situated, potent, and urgent site for interrogating my local conditions, as a feminist and as an artist, in and around the University. All of my work comes back to this: how

we politicize and render each other capacious and *capable* (to draw again on Stengers¹¹) in our knowledge making-and-sharing practices. I don’t know if it maps perfectly onto your conception of a “Care Drive,” but I’ve been thinking about starting a new project called “a year of collaboration.” I have been toying with framing it as a daily-practice project and, for one full academic year (Sept 2018–May 2019) only accepting offers (to give talks or write papers, etc.) if I can do them collaboratively. The project, as I am conceiving of it at this point, would formalize a practice (feminist collaboration) that I have been working with for a while, and bring attention to the way that many universities, while claiming themselves to be forward thinking, interdisciplinary, and collaborative, generally fail to acknowledge and value collaborative work adequately on end-of-year and promotion assessments. One of the scholars that I collaborate with, Sheena Wilson, has written about this recently.¹² Another feminist colleague is developing a project on what she is calling “promiscuous sharing,” and I like that formulation a lot.¹³

So, I guess, to go back to your initial question about how things have shifted over the course of this research, my current focus on feminist collaborative practice has been deeply informed by these past seven years of working on the maternal. I have been deeply taught by many, including you, which is one of the things that makes this exchange so enjoyable. So, to end on a future-oriented note, might I suggest NO! to

a university focused on individual achievement and gain at all costs and YES! to a feminist university that is promiscuous in its generosity, care, and creativity? One day, one choice, one action at a time, let us work to render each other, through writing, through art, through protest, through conversation, more capacious and capable, generous and able. Not always in agreement, but, nonetheless, aligned. ■





FOOTNOTES

- ¹ “Maternal Mattering: The Performance and Politics of the Maternal” in *The Companion to Feminist Art Practice and Theory*, co-edited by Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena Buszek (Wiley-Blackwell, 2019).
- ² Haraway organized this with Adele Clarke. The panel also included Kim TallBear, Michelle Murphy, Alondra Nelson, Chia-ling Wu and Yu-ling Huang (they are now working together on a book, *Making Kin Not Population: Reconceiving Generations*).
- ³ Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. p.209. See: http://e360.yale.edu/digest/global_population_projected_to_reach_11_billion_by_2100_un_estimates.
- ⁴ Gathering a diverse array of disciplinary thinkers together, the term ‘Anthropocene’—proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2007 to name the geologic impact of humans on the planet—has recently been at the core of a number of arts and humanities initiatives internationally and locally. While the term is a contested one (Altvater et al, 2016; Haraway 2016), events generated under its sign have been crucial to new thinking and debate on the importance of anti-anthropocentric, multispecies approaches to organizing our social and material worlds. Such thinking is present in recent texts such as Isabel Stengers’s *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*, Jedediah Purdy’s *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, Roy Scranton’s *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, Eben Kirksey’s *Emergent Ecologies* and Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin’s edited volume *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (all 2015). On the Capitalocene, see: Jason Moore (2015). On the Capitalocene and Plantationocene (and Chthulucene) see Donna Haraway (2016). On the Planthropocene, see: Natasha Myers (2017). On the More-Than-Human, see: Puig de la Bellacasa (2016).
- ⁵ Ettinger, Bracha. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2006).
- ⁶ For generative examples of this thinking see the work of feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick, who has argued powerfully for an understanding of the maternal (maternal thinking) as a mode that anyone can inhabit; Bracha Ettinger and Griselda Pollock, who champion a post-Lacanian conception of the “matrixial” as the primary given condition of all human subjects; Irina Aristarkhova, who offers a continental philosophical understanding of the matrix as an ethics of hospitality; and Lisa Baraitser, who argues for the maternal as the basis of an ethics of interruption. See Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Beacon Press, 1995); Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: An Ethics of Interruption* (Routledge, 2008); Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Irina Aristarkova, *The Hospitality of the Matrix: Philosophy, Biomedicine, and Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2012); Rosemarie Betteerton, *Maternal Bodies in Visual Arts* (Manchester University Press, 2014).
- ⁷ For one powerful example of work that takes multispecies maternal kin seriously see: Lisette Olivares and Cheto Castellano’s *Performing Posthumanist Maternalisms* at the following link (last accessed Sept 12, 2017): <https://museumofnonvisibleart.com/interviews/lisette-olivares/>.
- ⁸ Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press (2015) p.67.
- ⁹ Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. “A Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969!” Artist writing. Web. 4 July 2013. <https://www.arnolfini.org.uk/blog/manifesto-for-maintenance-art-1969> (last accessed Dec 2017).



▲ Event at the Garneau Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta in May of 2016

- ¹⁰ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Crossing Press; Reprint edition (2007).
- ¹¹ Stengers, Isabelle. *In Catastrophic Times*, Goffey, A. (trans.), Open Humanities Press (2015).
- ¹² Wilson, Sheena. “Feminist Energy Futures: A Call to Action.” *Speaking Her Mind*. Eds. Aritha van Herk and Christl Verduyn. Wilfred Laurier University Press. Forthcoming.
- ¹³ <http://thelearninggene.com>.
Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace (Beacon Press, 1995); Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: An Ethics of Interruption* (Routledge, 2008); Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota, 2009).



Thanks are due to all who made *New Maternalisms Redux* (2016) possible, including those involved in previous iterations of *New Maternalisms* (2012 and 2014) and with the *Mapping the Maternal* colloquium (co-organized with Sheena Wilson, May 2016). A list of those who supported all earlier events is available on www.newmaternalisms.com.

In addition to the exhibition and colloquium, the 2016 event included a screening of the feature length film *The Motherhood Archives* by Irene Lusztig, the film shorts *PetroMama: Mothering in a Crude World* by Sheena Wilson and Daniel Holden and *Family Tissues* by Gina Miller; a literary salon featuring Lise Haller Baggesen, Myrel Chernick, Christine Pountney and Asma Sayed; and a parent-artist-and-ally meet and greet event, led by visiting artists Christa Donner and Rachel Epp Buller and local artists Jacqueline Ohm and Alexis Marie Chute (hosted by the Creative Practices Institute).

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