**Maternal art practice: An emerging field of artistic enquiry into motherhood, care and time**

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**Defining/being defined by maternal**

*In 2007 I gave birth to my first child in a run- down state hospital in Eastern Europe. It was a swelteringly hot summer day and she arrived in the early hours of the morning. In the haze of delivering a child into this world, many things passed me by. However, I still remember clearly that as soon as she was handed to me, my name disappeared, and everybody started to call me the ‘mother’. It is a common practice in the area where I come from: you are referred as ‘mother’ even by closest family members. Suddenly there are no other parts of your identity that matter except your biological function – mother of a newborn child. At fi rst, I almost didn’t notice this sudden change; it might have been the tiredness and confusion that come with early motherhood. But then I was reawakened by one of my dearest friends, who was going through multiple rounds of IVF treatment at the time. She was the only one to call me by my fi rst name and that sounded both familiar, comforting and incredibly respectful. Also, it reminded me that both of us were defi ned by our (in)ability to deal with and uphold the traditional patriarchal assumptions concerning motherhood and mothering. Our thinking and personal understanding of the maternal was pushed back, silenced, unimportant. The world, at that moment, needed me to be just simply a ‘mother’ .*

As my co- editor Valerie Walkerdine notes in the preamble to this book, the maternal is central to each and every one of our lives; whether we are/aren’t or have/haven’t been mothers, the maternal in all its forms enters our lives in many ways. This has been argued by feminist scholars since the ’60s, as elaborated by Trebilcot, who claims that

mothering is central for every woman in patriarchy, whether or not we

bear or care for children, and that an understanding of mothering, both as it exists in patriarchy and as it might exist (if at all) in women- centred communities, is central to feminist theorizing. I realized that, whether or not one is a mother, mothering is a necessary focus for work in feminist theory.

(1984: vii)

As Walkerdine and Trebilcot astutely observe, even when women decide to make choices about their lives and their reproductive activities, that decision seems to be brought back to their attention on numerous occasions and in many different ways throughout their adult lives. Women may want to mother

and have children but may not be able to for various medical or personal reasons. Women are still paying the ‘motherhood tax’ and are being reprimanded because at job interviews and in promotion situations, panels assume they might become mothers and have (multiple) children. Women don’t want to have children. Women want to leave their role as mother and consequently their children. There are many ways that women relate to the maternal, although in mainstream culture there is still a big assumption that women should have children and there is only one ‘proper way’ to make and execute that decision.

As Rebecca Solnit notes, the ‘mother’ question that women receive is a ‘closed’ question,

[a] question to which there is only one right answer, at least as far as the interrogator is concerned. These are questions that push you into the herd or nip at you for diverging from it, questions that contain their own answer and whose aim is enforcement and punishment. ( 2017 : 5)

Questions that can never be answered in the right way, questions that can 0nly be answered with open questions – as Solnit inquires: ‘Would you ask a man that?’ ( 2017 : 5).

**Maternal art argument**

This edited collection explores, challenges and critiques various modes and forms of art practice which deal with the maternal. We invited artists, theorists and cultural workers to discuss their approach to what Sarah Ruddick (1989) calls ‘maternal thinking’, a unity of refl ection, judgment and emotion about

motherhood. The collection also addresses what Ruddick has always contested, that there is a profound need for sustained political and intellectual effort before maternal thinking can be heard and acknowledged in the public domain. So, ultimately, this edited collection seeks to understand how art allows practitioners

to reimagine the processes that solidify the mother as metaphor and trope in culture. Maternal art practice is an encompassing term that I use to describe a set of art practices which explore, refl ect and critique the dominant cultural notion of motherhood and the role of ‘the mother’ in contemporary art practice. I believe that maternal art practice is opening up new territories where artists can productively contribute to a wider set of political and philosophical discussions on care, labour and time. I have been inspired and empowered to use this term through dialogue with numerous practitioners and thinkers who have explored the intersections between art and the maternal over the last two decades ( Liss, 2009 ; Chernick and Klein, 2011 ; Epp Buller, 2012 ; Loveless, 2016; Donoghue, 2013; Bright, 2013 ; Irvin, 2016; Šimic and Underwood- Lee, 2017). As argued by Rachel Epp Buller, the maternal perspective is certainly lacking in

mainstream art education, and examples of work that engage with the political and conceptual weight of the maternal are rarely present, even in feminist art and art history classes ( 2016 ). In her monumental work Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution , Adrienne Rich asserts that feminist mothering seeks to reclaim power for mothers, to imagine and implement a mode of mothering that mitigates the many ways that patriarchal motherhood, both discursively and materially, regulates and restrains mothers and their mothering. She posits that it is the institution of motherhood that feminists should challenge and change and not the experience of mothering itself. Regrettably, mainstream art education still fails to grasp this important distinction between the institution and the experience of mothering. Even more, we often see how motherhood as institution is used to challenge any attempts to explore nonbiological maternal subjectivities in art.

With this collection, I want to propose that maternal art practice genuinely and profoundly embodies maternal thinking. The collection refl ects on two decades of sustained (though sometimes in appearance sporadic) international, intergenerational dialogue between artists, academics and philosophers that

draw on Ruddick’s ‘maternal thinking’ proposition and extends it in multiple directions. This territory was explored in depth for the fi rst time theoretically by Andrea Liss’s ‘Feminist art and the maternal’, where she extended maternal thinking into ‘thinking (m)otherwise’. This concept was certainly formative for

an emerging generation of young artists across the world, as is clearly visible from some of the contributions in this book. Liss not only validates the maternal as a mode of thinking and creating within feminist art practice but comprehensively brings to the forefront less- known (or perhaps hidden) artwork by feminist artists who use their practice to analyse how motherhood has been and is perceived and pictured.

Therefore, this collection brings together some of the major projects and contributions to the fi eld of maternal art from the last two decades and refl ects too on infl uences and possible new directions in the fi eld. As editor, I want to propose a shift from discussions about motherhood and art, to discussions about maternal art as fi eld of study. This shift is partially based on Lisa Baraitser’s observation that ‘the mother’ is the impossible subject par excellence. As Baraitser argues, ‘the mother’ is always caught in the gap between and is both idealized and denigrated in contemporary culture. Part object, part subject within

Western philosophy, ‘the mother’, Baraitser asserts, in some sense is everywhere: ‘our culture saturated with her image and yet she remains a shadowy fi gure who seems to disappear from the many discourses that explicitly try to account for her’ ( 2008 : 4). Baraitser also acknowledges, in her seminal work Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption , that by using anecdotal theory and feminist autobiographical writing, she is capable of discussing (her own) encounter with maternal subjectivity and of keeping the maternal experience in sight. This creative, messy written witnessing strategy, as Baraitser suggests, is something that many women use to allow maternal subjectivity to emerge in the work and

form/materialise as a maternal creative practice. For me, the encounter with the maternal through art is something that allows an interruption of the wider cultural discourse on ‘motherhood’. The messiness of maternal art is something that allows art practitioners to explore every aspect of maternity and reclaim

the importance of the mundane and usually overlooked moments of maternal experience. In many examples of maternal art practice we see a form of maternal subjectivity emerging, as Baraitser (2008 : 4) argues, characterized by physical viscosity, heightened sentience, a renewed awareness of objects, of artists’ own emotional range and emotional points of weakness, an engagement with the built environment, 6 a renewed temporal awareness where the present is elongated and the past and the future no longer felt to be so tangible and a renewed sense of oneself as a speaking subject. Maternal art practice by default deals with what Sara Ahmed calls the ‘sweaty concept’, a concept that ‘comes out of a bodily experience that is diffi cult, one that is “trying” and where the aim is to keep exploring and exposing this diffi culty’ ( 2014 ). This collection acknowledges the diffi culty of talking about maternal art practice and therefore celebrates the movement of artists who consciously claim back, investigate, question and deconstruct maternal subjectivity. With their practice, the artists and contributors to this book realign and reclaim a space in the wider discourse of art history, left unfi lled and unacknowledged for a very long time.

**The maternal mode of thinking: intergenerational collaboration as mode of existence**

As elaborated previously, the main aim of this edited collection is to present and foster examples of intergenerational dialogue on the maternal and art. Most of the contributors use art examples to explore various perspectives on the maternal. The collection builds on Jacqueline Rose’s question: ‘what does

thinking about mothers do to thinking?’ (1996: 413). The aim of the collection is to look beyond biological motherhood and present experiences that explore creatively encounters with infertility, medical intervention, adoption and fostering, queer mothering and childlessness by choice or not. With this,

I want to acknowledge that the structuring of the collection was impacted by previous feminist scholarship on concepts surrounding the maternal. As O’Barr et al. argue, the greatest impact of feminist scholarship on concepts of mothering

has been to divest them of their biological or moral agency, univocally expressed, outside of time and history, and to demonstrate the importance of understanding mothering within a dynamic, interactive context of social, political, historical and sexual factors, multicultured, multiracial, and multivoiced. ( 1990 : 3)

Therefore, the collection also brings contributions that explore the creative embodiment of intergenerational trauma and the complex territory of motherdaughter relationships and maternal ambivalence. The book also addresses the silence imposed upon the maternal in the Western art tradition. It considers the articulation of multiple maternal subjectivities and offers the possibility of theorising

women’s voices out of the silence to which they have been consigned by a philosophical and artistic tradition that privileges male creativity over female reproduction. The maternal mode of thinking and creating art which I propose is deeply informed by intergenerational dialogue between artists concerned

with working through/towards maternal subjectivities. As Šimic and Underwood- Lee assert: ‘As feminist artist/mothers we are standing beside our feminist (grand) mothers’ (2016: 7). There is also an emergence of an unprecedented collaborative ethos and dialogue in maternal art practices, which this collection modestly acknowledges and addresses. Many chapters (to be precise, seven) were co- written or emerged in ideological/conceptual collaboration with our foremothers in spirit. Many of the co- authored chapters speak directly to the potential of sharing this practice as a mode of existing. Many of the artists and academics featured here came together physically as well, to discuss maternal art practice during various local and international events and gatherings. Co- authorship also allows liberalisation of the author’s voice, the eradication of the ‘one who knows everything’. It disseminates knowledge and allows different

subjectivities to engag e in a messy dialogue about maternal experience.Rich and Arcana suggested early in their work on motherhood that women’s bonding is a potential solution to the oppressive nature of motherhood as an institution. The hope is that this collection will nurture a fertile ground for future discussions about how we analyse and speak about maternal subjectivities within art practice and education.

The collection also attempts to offer an overview of important art exhibitions and projects that have shaped the field in the last two decades.

I have tried to capture a maternal mode of artistic work which is deeply informed by intergenerational dialogue between practitioners on maternal subjectivity. This approach is informed by Paula McCloskey’s proposition on art- encounter as a formative element of maternal art practice (based on her first encounter with Louise Bourgeois’s art while being a single mother herself) (2013). The collection therefore emphasises the need to reclaim and acknowledge intergenerational influence and to discuss these intergenerational art- encounters as modes of subjective transformation. The intergenerational dialogue therefore is an integral part of all three parts of the book. Furthermore, each section attempts to represent a different generation of academics and artists and to refl ect on how their art and curatorial practice informed each other.

The first section, **Intergenerational maternal subjectivities** , reflects on practices since the early ’70s and major exhibitions/artworks about the maternal created since that period. The section serves as a bridge between artistic and academic contributions on maternal art and reflects on projects that define the field. It starts with a dialogue between Mary Kelly and Natalie Loveless, which productively explores Kelly’s infl uence on generations of young artists who explore the maternal through art. Mary Kelly is one of the most important figures in feminist art, due to the range and depth of her artistic projects as well as the insight and acuity of her writing. The interview looks into her practice, which analyses the maternal as a socially and affectively produced category. The second chapter is a dialogic encountering between Jennie Klein and Myrel Chernick on their collaboration for the exhibitions Maternal Metaphors and Maternal Metaphors II . An important interruption in the art- historical canon, these exhibitions gathered artwork that addressed the psychic, material, sociocultural, metaphorical and ideological aspects of motherhood and the maternal

in contemporary Western culture. This is followed by Tina Kinsella’s theoretical elaboration of maternal femininity that arises from Bracha Ettinger’s artistic process. She uses this to explore Woodman’s Self- portrait at 13 and re- evaluate the contribution that the pre- birth scene makes to maternal ontological constitution. Andrea Liss looks into the work of multimedia artist Carrie Mae Weems and her exquisite portraits of children and young adults in the Colored People series, 1989–1990. She argues that these portraits echo the urgent call for intersubjective caring, critical awareness and thoughtful action called for by Black Lives Matter and The Mothers of the Movement. This is followed by a creative dialogue about The Mothernists , the lovingly co- parented brainchild of Deirdre M. Donoghue and Lise Haller Baggesen. Conceived in spring 2014, this important project was born out of the necessity to bring together maternal

ethics and aesthetics with the Venn diagram of artistic and academic research. The section concludes with a refl ection by artist and activist Ruchika Wason Singh on the project A.M.M.A.A ., a platform for motherhood and maternal studies in contemporary Asian art discourse.

The second section, Encountering the maternal in artistic practice , looks at how the major theoretical and artistic events elaborated in the first section have informed current practice and thinking around maternal art. This section starts with a performative writing contribution by Eleanor Bowen and Laura González exploring the maternal fi gure through their experience as daughters and in relation to their artistic practice. This is followed by Rachel Epp Buller’s refl ection on her current creative practice, which examines letterwriting as an act of care. This contribution, taking an experimental hybrid format between critical essay, literary narrative and letter exchange, foregrounds maternal subjectivity in relation to care and time. Aram Han Sifuentes brings back the intergenerational to this section and talks about her work inspired by her mother’s artistic practice in South Korea, and how this changed when she emigrated to the United States and became a seamstress at a local dry- cleaning business. Elizabeth Philps discusses the performative turn in maternal art work and elaborates on the live performance documentation of a long- distance walk she did to her mother’s house, carrying her baby on her back, and reflects on the ways in which we can navigate a performance identity as a mother. Continuing the exploration of performance, Lena Šimic and Emily Underwood- Lee respond to each other’s solo performances, which were made as they negotiated their identity as ‘new mothers’, struggling with the immediacy of the needs of young children and their desires to assert their own sense of self within their new roles. This section concludes in a true interdisciplinary spirit with a chapter by Lizzie Thynne, comparing the fi lm work of Sarah Polley, and Michelle Citron in order to explore the ways in which it has become possible to reimagine the mother in women’s cinema and specifi cally to represent her desire.

The last section, **Maternal future: interrupting the field** , gives space to issues arising from concerns about maternal art practice in relation to the body, fragile identity and the diffi culty of articulating the maternal outside of patriarchal institutions. The section starts with an attentive dialogue between Alison

O’Neill and Jo Paul about their collaborative experience; one is a mother and the other is a non- mother or a ‘not- yet- mother’. Focusing on the disenfranchised grief of being childless not by choice, and how this connects to the experience and alienation of young motherhood, this chapter illustrates how both circumstances fall outside of the maternal ideal. Sally Sales elaborates on the cultural context around the ‘unfit mother’, and her chapter explores how a certain category of mother, who has been judged to be sufficiently unfit, leading to the enforced permanent removal of her children through adoption. It explores the way in which this has entered the narratives of adoption through a change in adoption practices in the contemporary era. This is followed by an astute chapter by Miriam Schaer that examines two extremes of motherhood – society’s bias against childless women, and what she calls ‘reverse mothering’.This is aptly followed by Lois Tonkin’s study about experiences of circumstantial childlessness, and how women utilised the drawing method to articulate an aspect of this experience in visually powerful ways. The section comes to a close with a chapter by Lulu Le Vay exploring queer straightness and how depiction

of same- sex partnerships and the creation of family through surrogacy both challenge and reproduce heteronormativity.

The book ends with a provocation by the theorist Irina Aristarkhova that brings us to current discussions about connections between mothering and the future as mediated, especially, by bioethics and law.

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*As my pre- school age daughters play with their dollies, I listen how they mother them. Is that my voice? Is that how they imagine and relive our relationship? How do we teach maternal?*

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*I look at a drawing of me on a Mother’s Day card. My head oversized, my glasses dominating my face, detailed patterns of my wrinkles and moles. Maternal etched in my mirror refl ection. Shaped and marked by interrupted nights, missed meetings, passed invitations. Motherload* .

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*As they grow older, they voice the forthcoming maternal concerns: Do I need a man to have children? Do I have to give birth? Do I need to have children? Can the planet take more people? And, I leave my opinions and knowledge aside and I listen. Maybe they know better, these children, young men and women, that need to take over. We don’t need a mother (nor father) figure on the pedestal, we need lived knowledge and dreams, imagining of a mutual future* .

**Maternal proposition**

This collection is a response to major shifts in practice and theory around the maternal which are created by fl uidity and impermanency – of living conditions, of employment, of female rights, of ecological uncertainties. By including both theoretical perspectives and the writing of art practitioners, the collection

aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice and offer a unique interdisciplinary perspective on the maternal art field. So, if you arrived here because you are searching for answers and it appears that there is no art practice about the maternal, I hope this will ground your experience and allow you to reconnect with artwork that unapologetically questions and celebrates maternal subjectivities. There are multiple entry points into this field, and it is becoming very clear that the maternal perspective is a missing link into the

way we encounter our fellow humans, our society and finally our planet. The book is interdisciplinary by nature, precisely because these problems are not discipline specific. It is difficult to follow a chronological, longitudinal history of maternal art practice, because many of these projects are left hidden, are not properly archived or disseminated. So, read these offerings as propositions to a different future, where the discursive and social regulations of maternal bodies are diffused and reimagined. And follow your journey through the maternal conundrum attentively and in dialogue with others. With hope that this collection

will become an invaluable resource for young art practitioners and students, I invite you to keep challenging, questioning and realigning the maternal through your practice.

**Notes**

1 As an example, during the recent one- day event Oxytocin: Mothering the World, coorganised by Birthrites Collection and Procreate Project in May 2019, the keynote speaker Del LaGrace Volcano (genderqueer artist, performer and activist), was challenged and attacked on the basis of their talk on parenting of non- binary children and Queer Family Constellations. This also highlights how the maternal is at the forefront of discussions about trans activism. The biological essentialist approach to the maternal appeared to be heavily used by TERF (trans- exclusionary radical feminist) activists in the audience.

2 See Dobkin Jess. ‘Lactation Station’. 2006–2016.

3 See Clayton Lenka’s piece. ‘The Distance I Can Be from My Son’, 2013.

4 See Broda Ana Casas. ‘Kinderwunsch’ series, 2014

5 See Furse Anna. ‘Glass Body’ 2006 or Bobby Baker ‘Drawing on a *Mother’s Experience’ 1998* .

6 See Qualmann Clare. ‘Perambulator’. 2014.

7 See Annu Matthew Palakunnathu. ‘Re- Generation’ project, 2010

8 See Thompson Selina. ‘Salt’, 2017.

9 It is important to note the intellectual/academic collaboration and the actual embodied, messy conversation emerging during various events. This entire book was conceived during the *Motherhood and Creative Practice: Maternal Structures in Creative Work* conference, which I co- organised with Valerie Walkerdine in 2015. But other important recent gatherings include the *Gender Generation* conference, *A.M.M.A.A* . a platform, *Mothernist I* and *II* gatherings, *Oxytocin I* and *II* , *New Maternalism* events and exhibitions, the *Cultural ReProducers* series of events and the *Artist Parent Index* , among many others.

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