



## Bread dough as material metaphor for the maternal experience

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This article traces my artistic practice with bread dough. The writing intertwines descriptions of practice and theory, exposing the ambiguities of maternal experience through the dough. Beginning with research on suspended temporalities, the dough reveals multi-layered insights into physical and economic maternal experience. Materialities of bread dough work together with embodied practices which explore them: slow, spreading growth, stickiness, weight and awkwardness, kneading as rhythmic, repetitive labour, invisibility. The writing connects the research to the performance project BRED, a participatory installation depicting a fictional start-up company, in which the dough stars as the object of ‘work,’ here no longer invisible, a vehicle for the voice of the maternal within a performative corporate setting.

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## Introduction

During the pandemic lockdowns I discovered a new use for bread dough. I had always baked bread, off and on for many years, and, moreover, enjoyed eating it. In 2020, led by an interest in suspended temporalities, which I saw as a way to interrupt an endless treadmill<sup>1</sup> of productive activity, I began allowing bread dough to rise on my bare skin, as part of my artistic practice-as-research. I documented these sessions with video and photos, and subsequently built a performance project, a fictional company called BRED, out of them. Bread dough, manipulated outside the kitchen and with no guaranteed end in baking, is freed of its normal identity and becomes, in the words of researcher Oli Mould, a ‘subversive spark,’ in other words an out-of-place object which opens up creative possibilities.<sup>2</sup> Here, the dough became an allegory for maternal experience through its particular, and transforming, materialities, and their associated temporalities. But why seek these insights through artistic practice-as-research, when plenty of excellent research already exists? I name, in brief, two reasons. ‘Practice-as-research’ recognises that knowledge is not only theoretical, but experiential: knowing through doing. This opens potentials to address gaps between knowledge and action.<sup>3</sup> ‘Artistic’ allows for a broad approach to experience, which includes playful, fantastical, and downright unrealistic acts which may nevertheless point to real-world insights. Together they can offer a new perspective with the power to stick in a way that a new piece of information may not; they offer a format to sit with questions, paradoxes and complexities.

While a body of work exists proposing ‘the maternal’ as a generalized philosophical category, in my work I am principally theorizing or practicing in relation to the visceral, biological act of mothering a human child, with its complexities, ambivalences, and oppressions, as lived in late capitalist, patriarchal Western society.<sup>4</sup> I am in the body of a white, middle-class, middle-aged woman and mother who has held both corporate and artistic roles. This writing is inextricably rooted in my own practice and life, which I hope may have relevance for others whilst being specific to my experiences and privileges.

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<sup>1</sup> Marxist theorist Moishe Postone coined the term ‘treadmill’ to describe the endless activity of capital. Postone, M. (1993) *Time, labor, and social domination: a reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.) p. 287–291.

<sup>2</sup> Mould, Oli. (2019) The Spark, the spread, and ethics: Towards an object-orientated view of subversive creativity *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 37, no. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Martin, Randy. (1998) ‘Critical Moves’ (Durham: Duke University Press) p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Argirò, A. (2023) ‘Between Private and Public: Reframing Maternity with Hannah Arendt’ Argirò, A. and Johnson, A. (organisers) *Visceral Bodies Symposium*, Kingston University, 27–28 April.

My own work with bread dough sits in the midst of theoretical works which were intimately connected with the research process.<sup>5</sup> The performance project and fictional company, BRED, which resulted from this research, is a continuing performance research engaging with these themes. What follows is a document of artistic research into the maternal via intimacies with bread dough, with connections to theory and performance.

### **Rising dough: staying, transitioning**

Tasked with using ‘a material’ in embodied practice in spring 2020, by artist Florence Peake as part of my MFA Creative Practice at Trinity Laban/Independent Dance, I followed an intuition and took some bread dough up to my office to allow it to rise on my skin. I recorded the process on my phone. Rising dough is slllooooww. It profoundly transforms, but from minute to minute, the progress seems invisible. This is why most folks make the dough and go do something else while it rises.

The emotions that emerged, placing just-made dough on bare skin, allowing the dough to rise there, were akin to the particular cocktail of boredom, love, care, fascination and imprisonment that characterised my maternal experience. This visceral metaphor unfolded further the longer I stayed with the dough.

In her book *Enduring Time*, interdisciplinary research scholar in Psychosocial Studies Lisa Baraitser writes about ‘staying’, using Serres’ notion of a ‘temporal folding’, which, like a ‘baker kneading dough’, ‘produces contiguities, proximities and confluences of thought’, in contrast to linear time which is framed as ‘inherently violent,’ breaking thoughts, memories and sensations apart.<sup>6</sup> The literal folds of the bread dough on my skin and the duration of the practice (always at least 30 minutes) created this kind of contiguous, proximal space, where my body, the maternal, patriarchy, and (economic) growth, productivity and consumption, blurred in non-linear, layered experience. The intimacy with the dough’s slow, soft, expansion on my skin, created sensations of frustration and pleasure, restriction and comfort.

As the dough restricted my choices for movement, it took on shades of patriarchy. Through its combination of inspiring love and care, with its unbearably slow progress, it recalled the long stretches of boredom punctuated by intense love that, for me, characterize reproductive labour. Time stretched, troubling a sense of linear progress. In movement improvisation on ‘waiting’, the language of ‘waiting-with’ (rather than

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<sup>5</sup> Fournier, L. (2021) ‘Autotheory as feminist practice in art, writing, and criticism’ (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press) p.107.

<sup>6</sup> Baraitser, L. (2017) *Enduring time*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic) p. 33 (Further references to this author are given after quotations in the text).

‘waiting-for’) became a transformative instruction for the practice with dough.<sup>7</sup> If you *wait-with* this dough, breath by breath, by the end of the half hour or forty-five minutes of your stillness, the dough is transformed. It has warmed to your skin, or your skin warmed to it. The soft spread of the dough contrasted with the hard discomfort of my body on the floor or chair. It’s easier and more socially acceptable to acknowledge maternal ambivalence when the ambivalence is directed towards dough.

The dough is in transition. Not yet bread, no longer flour and water and yeast. Allowing it to rise on my skin, I was aware of my power to derail this process, a parallel with maternal power. It reminded me that the need for care is in parallel to the vulnerability to violence for both babies and mothers in childbirth.<sup>8</sup> This vulnerability in its transition holds resonances with complex maternal feelings; the desire to care competes with rage at exhaustion, personal depletion, and restricted freedom, a sense that the dough is both the best and the worst thing to ever happen to you. For me, the rage is connected with an attachment to the future: my own, the dough’s, the child’s. Letting go of this attachment changes the experience.

Baraitser proposes a lack of futurity inherent in the maternal: ‘perhaps the maternal relation, and perhaps maternal time, suggests simply a willingness on the part of one to stay alongside another regardless of outcome.’ (LB 2017 p. 91) The millions of yeast cells in the dough, hungrily eating the sugar, expelling carbon dioxide to expand the dough, created a zoomed-in, temporally condensed experiential allegory for this willingness to ‘stay alongside.’ I would add that it highlighted the vulnerability of the dough, of me, of the whole process.

As the dough stretched, it also echoed the transition of matrescence (becoming a mother), echoing the stretching of the maternal body in pregnancy and through breast-feeding. Fleshy, soft, striated, these resonances swelled in my body-mind during the stretched, unproductive time that the dough rose on my skin.

In the BRED performance installation, the core working activity (instead of, say, emails) is the act of allowing the dough to rise on your skin.<sup>9</sup> We playfully reference

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<sup>7</sup> My movement research practice allows movement and speech to co-arise, which results in new movement scores and new turns of phrase. For more on movement improvisation, check out *One Shot* by Mark Tomkins and Meg Stuart or the work of Simone Forti with text and movement. The term ‘waiting with’ arose in movement improvisation on waiting, but I would like to acknowledge Baraitser and Salisbury’s important *Waiting Times* research (<https://waitingtimes.exeter.ac.uk/>), and note the phrase ‘staying-with’ from Baraitser’s *Enduring Time*. I was interested in ‘waiting-with’ as a way to twist the usual ‘waiting for’, creating a dissonance between what can be the unpleasantness of waiting and what I perceive as the implication of care or solidarity added to the phrase when it’s ‘with’ instead of ‘for.’

<sup>8</sup> Villarrea, S. (2023) ‘Birthing: Vindicating a Visceral Body Philosophically.’ Argirò, A. and Johnson, A. (organisers) *Visceral Bodies Symposium*, Kingston University, 27–28 April.

<sup>9</sup> Here’s how it works: everyone who arrives is ‘hired’ and ‘trained’ to ‘work’ at our fictional company. Those who in other contexts would be audience and performers co-create the performance together. More on BRED: <https://juliapond.com/bred>.

maternal experience in this fictional corporate context: our ‘training video’ instructs participants to ‘find a beautiful position’, place the dough ‘skin-to-skin’ and ‘make it clear you don’t mind waiting (Figure 1).’ ‘Skin-to-skin’ is the usual advice to new parents holding a naked baby to their own skin. The other two instructions reference the pressure on women and mothers to demonstrate their pleasure in subjugation, and to look good doing it. I draw a commonality between corporate customer service training and expectations of women’s demonstration of happiness; the emphasis is on external demonstration of a feeling with no need to actually feel it. As feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed says, the ‘happy housewife’ is ‘a fantasy figure that erases signs of labour under the signs of happiness.’<sup>10</sup> Or as feminist Marxist scholar Silvia Federici argued in 1975’s seminal *Wages Against Housework*, domestic labour has been assigned as a ‘natural’ desire of women and therefore does not need to be waged.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 1: Rising Dough.

### **Kneading: aural materiality, relentless repetition**

After I’d been experimenting with allowing the dough to rise on my skin for a while, I naturally got curious about other aspects of, and acts I could perform with, the dough. The act and sound of kneading emerged. It echoed the relentless rhythm of mothering (another meal, another thing to clean). It echoed as well the relentless rhythm of work, especially artistic work, in late capitalism, a pseudo-activity that

<sup>10</sup> Ahmed, S. (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> Federici, S. (1975). *Wages against housework*. Caringlabor. <https://caringlabor.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/federici-wages-against-housework.pdf> p.2.

merely demonstrates constant motion – and kneading is, literally, domestic labour.<sup>12</sup> Baraitser connects repetition with reproductive labour, drawing on de Beauvoir to state that reproductive labour embodies a kind of ‘necessity and futility’ that ‘renders it an absurdity’. (LB p. 70) In other words, the work is futile as it will never be over, but necessary to sustain life. This repetitive action is what Arendt terms ‘labour’ (as distinct from Marx’s wage labour) and involves ‘care and sustenance;’ it belongs to the present moment.<sup>13</sup> Dough is a literal embodiment of this type of labour but focusing on kneading and its sounds (which can recall the absurd rhythmic slapping of sex) allowed me to experience and perform it as absurd. Performing the section of BRED called the ‘Manager-festo’ I speak about the relentless rhythm of productivity while slapping and punching dough, before reminding listeners that they shouldn’t stop when they get tired, rather move the action to another body part – and I begin moving my knees in and out, slapping my inner thighs audibly together. Kneading is a main activity of the ‘managers’ in BRED. We observe workers with the dough rising, and offer feedback to optimise their ‘performance.’ Since these actions are characterised as work, yet produce nothing and are out of their domestic context, within the context of the creative fiction they are indeed necessary, futile – and absurd. We create another way to experience the feelings associated with reproductive labour, that anyone entering BRED can experience.

Baraitser suggests that what differentiates the repetition of maternal time is that it is the ‘time of repetition that comes to matter.’(LB p. 76) This ‘mattering’ is not economic and cannot even be related to the kind of person the child becomes: it is bound up in the intimacy of attachment. At BRED, with the dough as our ‘subversive spark’, this repetition becomes performative. We insert an absurdist version of maternal, life sustaining labour in a fictional corporate wage labour context in order to expose the contradictions and hypocrisies of the system. We hope that this matters.

### **BIG DOUGH: Overwhelm/Invisibility**

The folds and spreading of the dough recalled my experience through pregnancy and early motherhood of spreading, unruly flesh.<sup>14</sup> I began practicing with bigger pieces

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<sup>12</sup> Kunst, Bojana. (2015). *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism*. (John Hunt Publishing Limited) p.7.

<sup>13</sup> Jackson, T. (2021) *Post-Growth: Life after Capitalism*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press) p.116.

<sup>14</sup> Here I would like to acknowledge Santina Amato’s work, (<https://santinaamato.com/>) whose series of ‘portraits of women with their weight in dough’ I find very beautiful and akin to my work. Amato invites women to participate in making the dough and then to be photographed with the dough over a two hour period. Her interest is in the ‘ephemerality of the dough’ and also the labour women perform. My work in some senses overlaps with this with the difference that I am focused on performance and practice, and interested specifically in the mothering body and its intersections with work and art through the BRED project. Likewise artist Laura Wilson works with dough in a more abstract way, exploring how it moves with the body. <https://www.laurawilson.me/fold-and-stretch/>.



of dough. Big dough is exhausting, hard work. It invites a kind of carnal intimacy with the dough, a becoming doughflesh (**Figure 2**). It makes you move more slowly. It obscures and changes your own form. It's heavy, and hard to move. As it rises, air pockets open up – strings of dough stretch ever more thinly across them – recalling a mother's flesh at the end of pregnancy, and the emotional stretching thin of meeting the constant needs of a child, while attending to a mother's own personal needs and perhaps also working for money. It is overwhelming, but one is supposed to make it look easy, to make the effort, and the stretching thin, invisible. The dough in its huge, all-covering and consuming state of 'big dough' creates an experience that brings to light the dirty secret of an economy where the desire for economic growth is divorced from 'any conception of human need' — which is that endless economic growth is actually a 'destructive force.'<sup>15</sup> The dough becomes unmanageable, unwieldy, out of control. And this extravagant growth, which makes my flesh increasingly invisible, references the 'iceberg model'.

Feminist economic geographers Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, under the pen name J.K Gibson-Graham created iceberg model of the economy, which visually represents this invisibility of the essential labour of the maternal by showing wage labour as the tip of an iceberg and the domestic and care labour associated with motherhood (as well as natural resources) below the surface of the ocean.<sup>16</sup> Both the maternal subject's economic value and the importance of her inner life are made invisible by prioritising economic growth and, as I wrote about earlier, papering over the real labour of mothering with 'happiness.' The disproportionate load on mothers during the pandemic showed that this has not changed as much as we think/thought/hoped.<sup>17</sup>

In the BRED performance, we offer a tongue-in-cheek 'branding exercise' which creates a visceral experience of stretching through imagination-fed movement improvisation which is guided by my co-performer, Manuela Albrecht, my close collaborator on the project. We begin by imagining the flesh as dough, and moving inspired by visualising the yeast cells emitting carbon dioxide as they digest sugars, expanding and stretching the 'doughflesh' in all directions. When the 'doughflesh' hits an obstacle, it simply expands in a new direction. With this performance moment, we hope to recall the experience of being overstretched, and also refer to unbridled economic growth with all its inherent destructive forces.

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<sup>15</sup> Hickel, J. (2020). *Less is More: How Degrowth will save the world.*(Windmill Books, A division of Penguin House) p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Collard, R. and Dempsey, J. (2020) 'Two icebergs: Difference in feminist political economy', *Environment and Planning. A*, 52(1), pp.237–247. p. 240.

<sup>17</sup> Kisner, J. (17 Feb 2021) The Lockdown showed how the Economy Exploits Women. She Already Knew. The New York Times, New York. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/17/magazine/waged-housework.html>.



Figure 2: Big Dough.

### Stickiness, Traces

Matrescence is a one-way street. It leaves you changed. I find myself cleaning up after my friends reflexively, adult though they may be. The stretch marks around my belly button will always be there. The shape of my body itself changed. News about violence towards children hits harder than it did before I was a mom: I know clearly what it takes to produce a life out of your own body and how intolerable the early loss of that life would be. Sometimes, that life also literally clings to you when you are trying to go to work or see friends.

The dough is sticky. It leaves behind awkward traces of itself (Figure 3). It is really, really hard to scrape off, and, kind of like heading into a meeting with milk stains on your shirt, or with your hair uncombed because you were too busy combing a small person's first, it marks you. Stickiness has not made it as a material modality into performance; perhaps it is too logistically challenging. However, in studio practice it yielded some evocative images.





**Figure 3:** Dough trace.

### Conclusions

Who cares? This artistic practice-as-research and performance project aim to allow participants to question, from an embodied perspective, tropes about the value of reproductive labour and the maternal experience. The performance engages ‘with the ethics and aesthetics of contemporary labor’, by ‘delegating’ the performance to participants who follow instructions from the artist and as such co-create the performance. (Bishop 2012: 91) Transposing certain ‘maternal’ experiences into the materiality of the dough, my hope is to access a wider population than just those of us who have given birth and identify with the role of the mother. 2023 data records an estimated 2 billion mothers worldwide, or just about 25% of the whole human population: these are not niche concerns, no matter how they may be painted.<sup>18</sup> My artistic research will certainly not smash the patriarchy all alone; however I offer this playful intervention which both insists on making space for my own creative expression, and may help mothers – and others – think and feel into the complicated experiences of the maternal, especially in the context of neoliberal capitalist work culture.

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<sup>18</sup> Source: <https://financebuzz.com/mothers-day-statistics>.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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