

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home presents
Affective Exchange of Labour between Invisible Mother and
Underpaid Au Pair

Lena Simic

This paper will discuss invisible maternal labour and underpaid au pair labour in relation to three arts projects, which took place through the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, Liverpool, UK:

Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Simic Live Art Event (MAP Live, Carlisle 2008)

The Hazardous Family Performance Intervention (Hazard Festival, Manchester 2008)

Au Pair Artist Wants to be Part of the Liverpool EU Capital of Culture 2008 with Great British Family Artist Residency (Cvjeticanin, Polygon 2008)

These arts projects follow a line from historical materialist feminist art in the late 1960s and 1970s, particularly taking inspiration from Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work: *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* (1969), *Maintenance Art Task: Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Come In* (1973), *Some Kinds of Maintenance Cancel Out Others, Keep Your Head Together – 1000 Times*, or *Babysitter Hangup – Incantation Ritual* (1974), as well as Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document* (1973-79), plus the 'Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry, 1973-1975' exhibition, organised by Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly. More contemporarily, these arts practices can be contextualised within cultural contexts that the Institute defines as anti-capitalist and/or feminist, both of which are particularly adept at outlining formulations of cultural agency through the rubric of the personal as political. The three arts projects aim to offer a playful as well as affective social critique on the invisibility of maternal labour, whilst bearing in mind and referencing different histories, memories, economies and geopolitical locations, past and present – more precisely my lost homeland Yugoslavia, now Croatia. Finally, the paper ends by opening up an argument for affective 'creative exchange' (Iris Marion Young)¹ which can take place through

multiple subjective encounters shared between artists, parents, children, feminist histories, theories and labour.

Each woman in her own home is making a revolution.
Selma Jones ²

For anarchists, means and ends must be consistent: freedom cannot be achieved through the paradox of limiting it in the present. People learn the habits of freedom and equality by attempting to practice them in the present, however imperfectly. The primary means of doing this is through building alternative forms of organization alongside the institutions of the larger society.
Carol Ehrlich ³

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home is a home-run initiative, run out of the spare room of a council house in Everton, Liverpool, UK. The Institute is run by a family of two adults and three kids, collectively, twoaddthree (Gary Anderson, Lena Simic, Neal, eight, Gabriel, six, and Sid 22 months). The Institute is a self-sufficient and sustainable initiative drawing 10 per cent of all income from its members (Gary and Lena work as university lecturers as well as freelance artists, the children receive child tax credits and child benefit). The Institute is concerned with dissent, homemade aesthetics, and financial transparency as well as critiquing the capitalism of culture, as was embodied in Liverpool 08, European Capital of Culture. The Institute is interested in social transformation and has refigured a part of the family living space (the spare bedroom) into a meeting place for artists, activists and cultural dissenters. This activity is undertaken in order to develop and extend dialogues about a 'culture' not necessarily driven by market forces. The Institute has hosted a number of artist residencies and events, ranging from individual encounters through group conversations to theatrical performances.⁴

The foundation of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home has come about at a very particular time for myself and my family. First of all, it has arisen from both my and my partner Gary's practice-as-research PhD projects and our arts collaborations over the last ten years, all of which in some sense were concerned with homemade and DIY aesthetics. This particular approach to arts practice is informed by my becoming a mother at the relatively early age of twenty-five, and thus managing to involve the children in my arts making processes and research 'career', having them side by side. Secondly, the Institute

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comes about as the answer to the question of how one prepares children for the world; how does one raise children critically, socially and lovingly? The Institute has provided us with a formulation of a methodology and ethics for the parenting of our three young children; education and the raising of our children through art activist activities, creative expression, critical debate and social encounters in our home and beyond (with other artists and activists, as well as their children). The Institute could in a sense be viewed as a form of home schooling, a critical complement to school education. Thirdly, the Institute is a direct response to the explicit link between art and capitalism, which was apparent in Liverpool 08, European Capital of Culture, and subsequently instrumentalisation of contemporary arts practice. Geographically, the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home is situated in Everton, an L6 postcode; a less affluent, less desirable, 'deprived' area of the city, a place where culture does not happen and where none of the important international arts events took place during the Liverpool 08, European Capital of Culture year.

The Institute is very conscious of building on the feminist tradition of working at home and using domestic issues as filters through which critique can take place, reclaiming the slogan of the personal as the political. The Institute brings its politics home, literally. In opening our own home with its inevitable contradictions and tensions, we would argue that the Institute opens the site of the domestic both critically and affectively. In terms of other independent artist-led spaces in domestic settings, the Institute could be contextualised with the Center for Suburban Research in Belfast, Deveron Arts, a contemporary arts project in Huntly, a small rural town in Aberdeenshire, Springhill Institute in Birmingham and My House Gallery in Nottingham amongst others.⁵ As the Institute we have recently participated in the 'artists as parents as artists' forum at Wysing Arts Centre organized by Townley and Bradby⁶, and have held numerous conversations, debates and interviews with fellow artists/scholars/parents – here I can highlight the work of Paula McCloskey and Thelma Mort, both of whom are currently undertaking PhD research around the notions of the maternal, education and/or arts at Sheffield University and University of Cambridge respectively. The Institute draws from other artists and cultural contexts that we define as anti-capitalist: 'anticonsumer' activists the Vacuum Cleaner, and Ange Taggart (My Dad's Strip Club),

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artist-led initiatives theverycoop, and Liverpool-based The Royal Standard, the network Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (labofii) and PLATFORM, a London based art activist group.

The three arts projects that I discuss here are all concerned with maternal labour, which is at the same time banal, everyday and repetitious, as well as affective. I am talking about physical care of the children: preparing food, feeding them, washing them, changing nappies, putting them to sleep, talking to them, taking them out to a park, playground, swimming lessons, walking, reading stories, bedtime and so on. The three projects address:

1. recognition and naming of the invisible maternal labour in taking care of a small baby during maternity leave (through *Sid Jonah Anderson* by Lena Simic, Live Art Event)
2. critique of woman's position within monogamous heteronormative nuclear family unit (*the Hazardous Family*, performance intervention)
3. affective exchange of labour between invisible mother and underpaid au pair (*Artist/Au Pair*, Artist Residency).

In Marxist terms this kind of domestic labour could be classified as unalienated labour, of 'use value' (as pointed out by Lise Vogel, Susan Sontag, Angela Davies and Eli Zaretsky)⁷, but at the same time it could also be seen as uselessly repetitive, trivial, isolating and lonely (as pointed out by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, in her seminal essay 'Women and the Subversion of the Community', 1972).⁸ For my own purposes, as an artist, I re-create, re-name and most importantly, re-live such maternal labour into critical arts praxis, and make the invisible and undervalued labour visible. However, as I am re-imagining maternal labour through arts practice, I am also writing my own maternal subjectivity.

Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Simic live art event took place in March 2008 as a part of MAP Live event at Source Café in Carlisle.⁹ The performance features my third baby Sid, who was born on the 7th August 2007, then seven months old. The performance stages Sid's bedtime routine. The live action on stage consisted of performing the daily routine with Sid: bathing, dressing, feeding, laying down to sleep. Thus this very banal everyday action gets heightened through its staging: my movements on stage are quite sharp, neat and timed whilst the performance space and props are highly organised. The action was complemented by

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audio-visual footage: home body painting of my pregnant tummy into a Yugoslav (meaning non-existent, impossible, past) flag, extracts from my diary, which I have kept since my last month of pregnancy, and photographs from my walks in the park. This diary has for me become a generative, critical and contemplative space which charts, marks and critiques notions of the maternal in the time around the baby's birth and during my maternity leave. The video footage references my maternity leave, that laborious and contemplative in-between time, in fragments, with interruptions, through routine. This is about the impossible expectations placed on the mother and a revolutionary child. The event was done partly through my own desire to thoroughly connect my two spheres of life, children and art, and also to acknowledge the labour of parenting within an arts context. Thus, the piece addressed and collapsed the difference between arts making and explicit mothering.¹⁰

The Hazardous Family was a part of HAZARD 08: breaks of hazardous behaviour and guerrilla live art – public interventions in the city of Manchester on the 12th July 2008. Through this event the Institute investigated Fredrich Engels' legacy via political speeches and two family picnics at Parsonage Gardens and in front of Chetham's Library, both of which are prominent locations in relation to Engels' twenty-two year long stay in Manchester. Inspired by Engels' quote 'He is the bourgeoisie and the wife represents the proletariat' (1884), *The Hazardous Family* was a performance intervention. This was an opportunity to investigate the construction of the family within present day consumer capitalism through a reading of Engels' texts, extracts from *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* and *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Some of the chosen extracts deal with the subjugation of women within a family unit – therefore through the performance I, as a mother and a woman, become subjugated to a domineering male presence. This was evident through my staged caring of the children whilst the father is addressing the public. The family picnic took place under a red banner, which had “The first division of labour is that between man and woman for the propagation of children” Marx & Engels' written on it in white paint. Lena, the mother, and Gary, the father, eventually took turns between taking care of the children, Neal, Gabriel and Sid (feeding them and playing with them) and making political speeches. The children distributed propaganda leaflets

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containing information about Engels' stay in Manchester and extracts from our performance text:

Directions

Mark out a picnic space with 30 meters of hazard tape. Tie the tape around a bin, move on towards a tree and then proceed to a park bench. This will make a triangular picnic space. Proceed to tie the red banner around the tree and park bench. Make certain the words 'The first division of labour is that between man and woman for the propagation of children' Marx & Engels, are clearly visible on the banner and written in white paint. Spread the picnic throw in the centre of the space. Place all the items of food and drink on the throw. Take the soap-box and place it front-right of the picnic space. Place all propaganda leaflets in clear view of the public either on the soap-box or on the picnic spread. The following extracts are read out at intervals over the following lunch hour.¹¹

Branka Cvjeticanin (Polygon, Croatia) undertook the artist residency 'Au Pair Artist Wants to be Part of the Liverpool EU Capital of Culture 2008 with Great British Family' at the Institute for fourteen days in July 2008. Cvjeticanin was concerned to make critical interventions into the normalised notions of domestic labour as 'women's work', to investigate how the economies of maintenance work function in domestic settings, and also to puncture the wheel of the au pair agency that advertised for au pairs with the promise of 'a rich cultural experience of the Great British family' (taken from an au pair brochure). Cvjeticanin's deliberate misreading of this promise was what initially inspired her residency at the Institute.

An extract from Cvjeticanin's proposal:

to: theinstitute@twoaddthree.org
 from: **branka cvjeticanin**
 contact: branka.cvjeticanin@polygon.hr
 subject: **RESIDENCY**
 date: **February 28, 2008**

AU PAIR ARTIST WANT TO BE PART OF THE LIVERPOOL EU CAPITAL OF CULTURE 2008 WITHIN THE DISSENT GREAT BRITAIN FAMILY.

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SHORT BIO_link www.polygon.hr/upload/files

PROPOSAL

There is an old Slavic saying “Otisao/la je u svijet trbuhom za kruhom” – “He/She went to the world following his/her belly in search for the bread”. The whole Universe is described in that sentence, it.s historical, social, cultural, political and economic phenomena and state of mind of many generations in my family and in many other families from this Balkan Europe part of the world. On that “western” side, specially in the case of Great Britain there are only few legal economic channels open to foreigners (read: those who were never part of the former colonies).

...

I decide to follow the agency pamphlet which promise me following: If you are the girl between 18 and 27 years (-), and you love to travel (+), and you willing to improve your English (+), get to know British tradition (+) through the life in family and children care (+)? (=) Au Pair in Great Britain will support you in that and even give you more by becoming equal member of the family, through the experience which leads toward long lasting friendship with your hosts.

The family provides: pocket money from 50 - 100 GBP weekly (Croatian average salary is 400 GBP per month, artist average is lower); accommodation and food for free with the family; spare time for attending language school; health insurance.

As a response to this proposal and after meeting Cvjeticanin in Liverpool, I, the mother, provided her, the Artist/Au Pair, with Workload Documents – an outline of regulations, rules activities and tasks for the residency, whose main objective was taking care of the children. For me, from my position as a mother, these documents aim to name and juxtapose the relationship between invisible maternal labour and underpaid au pair labour. My own maternal labour (the one which I sought to represent through the *Sid Jonah Anderson by Lena Simic* project) gets to be re-named as it is given over to Artist/Au Pair. In addition to re-naming the labour, we sought to provide Cvjeticanin with a cultural experience of the city by sending her to all the major art galleries (Tate, Bluecoat, FACT), landmarks (Antony Gormley’s ‘Another Place’, SuperLambBananas), local council’s swimming baths, toddlers’ groups and so on. Branka undertook all of these activities with the children, as well as

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documenting the process of her residency through photographs (the artist book ‘The Anderson Family’ is currently in development by Cvjeticanin).

Here are extracts from the Workload Documents:

Workload, Rules and Regulations for Artist/Au Pair Branka Cvjeticanin during the Residency at the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home

Work Start Date: Wednesday 2 July 2008

Work End Date: TBC

Pay Day: Fridays

Pay: £100 per week (£20 per day)

Work Days: Monday – Friday

Working Hours: varied but not exceeding 8 hours per day

Days off: Saturday and Sunday

Duties will vary each day, but generally Artist/Au pair will be taking care of Sid, 10 month old baby, and some care of Neal, 7 and Gabriel 5. Artist/Au Pair is, in addition to salary, offered food and accommodation. Artist/Au Pair is allowed to eat any food she finds in the kitchen. She is welcome to all family meals: breakfast with the children in the morning, lunch with parents and the baby, and main evening meal with all the members of the family. However, Artist/Au Pair is also expected to help herself from the family’s kitchen and prepare simple meals for herself and the children.

In taking care of the baby, Artist/Au Pair is expected to prepare baby milk, feed the baby, bath the baby, put the baby to sleep, change nappies, take the baby for walks, go to playground, play with the baby, apply sunscreen if necessary, visit local baby/toddler’s clubs... In taking care of the older boys, Artist/Au Pair is expected to teach them a bit of Croatian, play with them, read them stories, take them for cultural visits (Museum, Galleries etc), take them to the park and playground, prepare simple meals (pizza in the oven, fish fingers, scramble eggs, pasta etc).

Thursday 3 July: take care of all three children from 3:30pm – 11:30pm. Sid goes to sleep around 7pm. Neal and Gabriel go to sleep at 8pm. You will be taken to Everton Leisure Centre for Neal and Gabriel’s swimming lessons, after which you will have to walk them back home through Everton Brow. Simple meal, playtime, bedtime.

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15:30 arrive home to 7 Bright Street, ready to work
 15:45 join Lena and children to go to Everton Leisure Centre for Neal and Gabriel's swimming lessons
 16:15 Neal and Gabriel's swimming lessons, watch them with Sid
 16:45 Neal and Gabriel's swimming lessons finish, help them with showering and putting on their clothes
 17:00 walk back home through Everton Brow, Neal and Gabriel should be able to help you in your adventure of finding home (estimated walking time: 30 minutes max)
 17:30 arrive back home and start preparing simple meal for the children (pizza or fish fingers or eggs or anything else; Sid eats the same as children)
 18:00 dinner with all three children
 18:30 Sid has his last milk bottle for the day; Neal and Gabriel watch telly or play in the garden
 19:00 Sid goes to sleep
 20:00 Neal and Gabriel go to sleep (reading them a story would be much appreciated)
 20:30 relax, watch telly, check emails, write your diary etc.
 23:30 parents arrive back home

Cvjeticanin's own encounter with Sid is reflected in the photograph:



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and who r u?... i.m doing something can't. u see _ me. it's good telepaty is working definetly ... he can read my thoughts i can read his... he think that I think... oh my god what i.m going to do with this think... but now when he can express himself in such a facial detail i have no worries anymore... he is telling me everything... we entering another dimension!

By this provocative project the Institute can be held responsible for 'outsourcing labour' and replicating certain kinds of exploitation that are taking place in this affluent society as we speak right here right now from a highly privileged position. At the end of the day, both Branka and myself are highly educated, arguably middle class artists. However, it is my belief that one of the aspects of arts practice is to use the lived experience of this durational event and expose those social inequalities, between children and parents, mothers and fathers, mothers and au pairs. Speaking from my position as someone who has immigrated to this country, a foreigner with Indefinite Leave to Remain, that was gained through a marriage to an 'all proper' British person, I feel a certain responsibility and alliance with 'others', in this case Eastern and Central European au pairs, more precisely my Croatian and Slovak friends: Marina, Sanela, Vlatka, Barbara, Mara, Zuzana and Valeria, to name a few. Within this context it is my wish to raise the topic of au pairs in relation to maternal matters, and ask questions around the relationship between the mother and au pair, bearing in mind class and subjectivity.

In its practice, the Institute insists on positionality and makes its many asymmetrical relationships visible, never representing the family as a unit but as a complex grouping of asymmetrical relationships - we derive the term asymmetrical from feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young, who argues against a desire for sameness and symmetry, but an embracing of differences that can fuel 'creative exchange'.¹² Such asymmetrical relationships start with the one between parents and children, which become more obvious when staged through performances, and move to more complex ones, like a relationship between mother and au pair.

Furthermore, affective creative exchanges take place through multiple subjective encounters shared between artists (Branka and I), parents (Gary and I), children (Neal, Gabriel and Sid's involvement in the Institute), feminist histories (1960s and 1970s feminist

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art practice in relation to contemporary art activist work), theories (opening up the notion of asymmetrical reciprocity), and finally labour, which connects all of those people and activities.

¹ I. M. Young, 'Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought', *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 3 (3) (1997), 340-363.

² Selma James, *A Woman's Place* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972) < <http://libcom.org/library/power-women-subversion-community-della-costa-selma-james> >.

³ Carol Ehrlich, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Can it be Saved?' in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. by Sargent, Lydia (Boston: South End, 1981), (p. 114).

⁴ See < <http://www.twoaddthree.org> > for information on residencies and events.

⁵ Anna Francis, a former artist resident at the Institute, has contributed to a publication: Rebecca Chesney, Robina Llewellyn and Elaine Speight, *Pest: Domestic Spaces* (Castlefield: Pest Publications, 2008), which 'focuses on the nature of artist-led organisations in domestic settings in an investigative and playful manner'. In addition to the Institute, the publication considers other contemporary artist-led spaces such as Porch Gallery, Twenty+3 Projects, Fly Gallery, Convenience Gallery and Springhill Institute.

⁶ For more information about Artists as Parents as Artists event at Wysing Arts Centre see <<http://www.axisweb.org/seCVEN.aspx?CVID=336758&PID=414>>.

⁷ For a fuller discussion about 'Feminism and Marxism' and the aforementioned authors see Josephine Donovan's *Feminist Theory: the intellectual traditions* (New York: Continuum, 2000 [1985]), 79-103.

⁸ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972) < <http://libcom.org/library/power-women-subversion-community-della-costa-selma-james> >.

⁹ MAP Live Event 2008, Source Café, Carlisle, <<http://www.matrixartprojects.org/map-live-evening-2008.html>> .

¹⁰ For more information about arts making and maternity leave, see L. Simic, 'Impossible Expectations and Everyday Interventions: A Document of Maternity Leave', *n.paradoxa: International Feminist Art Journal*, Volume 22 (2008), 79-83.

¹¹ Full version of the performance text and a video extract from the performance are available for download from < www.twoaddthree.org/documents >.

¹² I. M. Young, 'Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought', *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, 3 (3) (1997), 340-363.

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