

A cartography of maternity, subjectivity and art-encounters

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This text introduces an ongoing, living inquiry concerned with *maternity, experience, subjectivity and art-encounter*. Here I set out a cartography of this research that stems from my maternal experience and an encounter with the art of Louise Bourgeois.

There may have been different trajectories that this project could have taken. It takes shape as a multiplicitous research project that is concerned with exploring maternal experience AND maternal subjectivity AND maternity's relationship to art from a situated lens (Haraway, 1991). It explicates its location in my experience 'I' and then traces the route to other non-I's (in texts, art and meetings with artists). It draws into its body a number of seemingly disparate elements and heterogeneous terms establishing liaisons and relations between personal experiential accounts, psychoanalytical thinking and sociological thinking, discussions of art, philosophy, visual images and historical references. It is an *assemblage*ⁱ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987); yet this status as an assemblage does not prevent it from containing assemblages within itself, and it will go on to enter into new assemblages with its readers, other literature, research and so on.

Before there were any thoughts of other theories or thinkers, before this multiplicitous piece took shape, there were thoughts of myself, or my life, more specifically my maternity and an encounter with the art of Louise Bourgeois. It was this encounter that had a transformative impact on me by creating a space to contemplate my experiences and beyond, to a consideration of the relationship between my maternal experiences and others' maternal experience – generally and specifically in relation to 'maternal art,' my art-encounter and other art-encounters, a development of my own art practice and from this exploration a wider consideration of art and subjectivity. It was from these reflections that the idea(s) for this research emergedⁱⁱ.

I am in the middle of this inquiry which weaves reflexive writing with textual analysis and filmed interviews. I have taken these activities as generative methods to investigate maternal subjectivity, experience and art-encounter; in doing so exploring the juxtaposition of the personal and the academic, and the tension between intimacy and research.

I

Beginnings – Concepts and Objects

This research did not start out from a fixed point with a fixed methodology as it emerged from my maternity – a contemplation of my maternity, and an art-encounter. From this place it could be said to have had several beginnings from which several activities tentatively developed. In reflecting on my maternity I started to ask questions about the affect that the art of Louise Bourgeois had on me; about the relationship between my maternity and art. Over time, my thinking seeped out of the bounds of my experience to consider others. I talked to other women about their experiences, I met with artists, I read about maternity and ‘maternity and art,’ I started to write down my thoughts and draw. In reflecting and writing about this process, I observed how the activities all involved objects: texts, drawings, films; some of which were existent, some of which were created. These objects were all in some way related to the conceptsⁱⁱⁱ that were there at the inception of this journey: maternity, subjectivity, experience, art and encounter. I noticed how as the iterative and heuristic approach to the research began to gather momentum these activities, which were (are) essentially interactions and dialogues between concepts, objects and me, tentatively *became* the research or the ‘method’ used to explore maternal subjectivity, experience, art and encounter. Or, put another way, it is the interaction between these concepts (of maternal subjectivity, experience, art and encounter) and objects that constitute the research^{iv}.

This research has thus developed around the concepts and objects and how they interact. The first diagram below images how the objects and concepts have been approached in groups, the second how they inter or trans-relate:

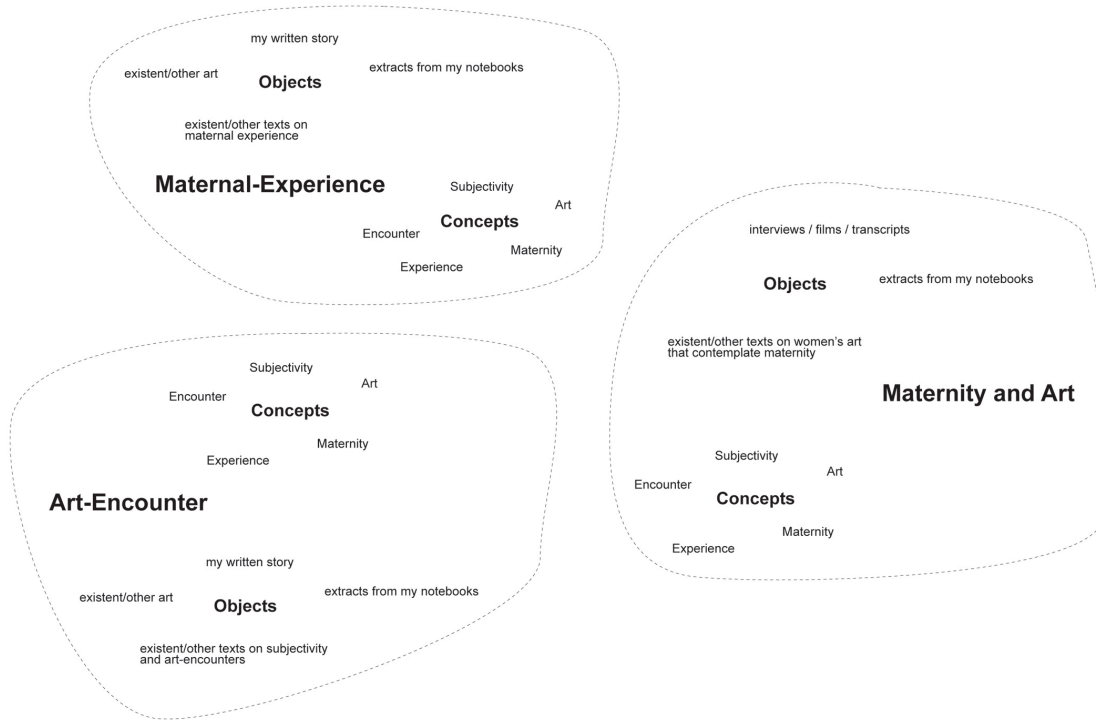


Diagram 1

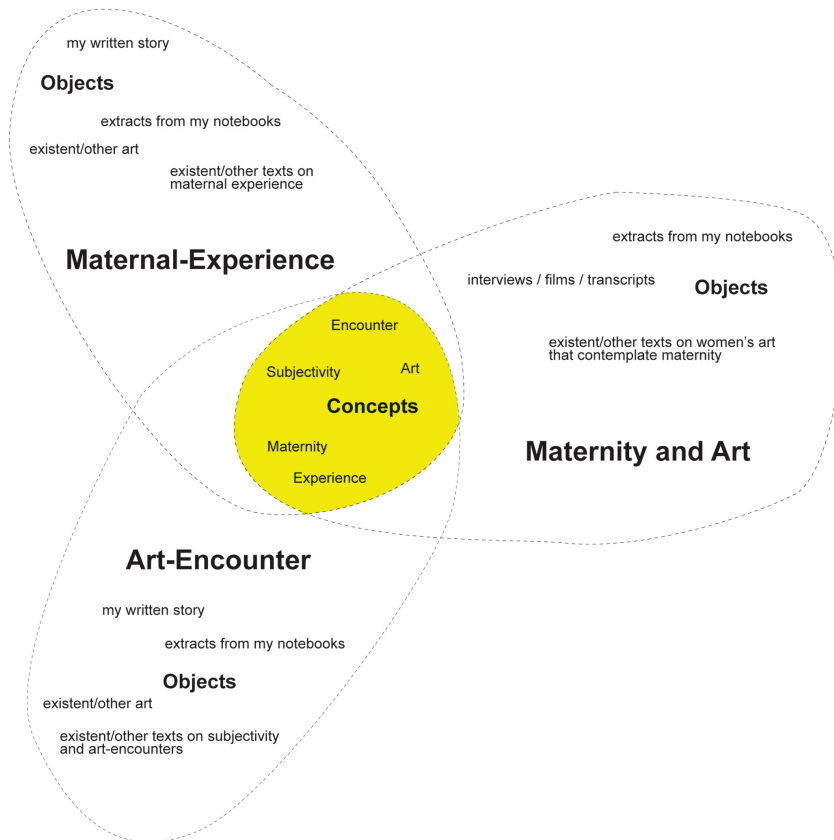


Diagram 2

The diagrams show how the research is organised into three groups: maternal experience, art-encounter, maternity and art. What follows is some insight into the content of these groups.

II

Maternal Experience

This research has its origins in my maternal story. I will not retell my story in depth here. It is enough to say that I have had what I term a ‘disrupted’ maternity. My matrilineage bears witness to a history of ‘disrupted’ or ‘lost’ maternities. For my part, I have a fractured relationship with my mother, and had a difficult and traumatic early experience of being a mother. There was a period of a few months when I had so lost confidence in myself as a mother that I actually thought it would be better for my son to be predominantly cared for by someone else. I believed this was my only option. My son is now eight and is aware of this difficult time and how I explore this in my work. He is equally aware of what our actual relationship is now; a relationship that has been nurtured and continues to develop; a relationship that is as complex as any mother-son relationship but one that I believe is strong and positive for us both. When I made the decision to stay and to not relinquish the care of my son, I had to work through the difficult circumstances I faced when he was an infant. Some of these issues are ongoing. I now ‘share-care’ my eldest son with his father; an arrangement that I continue to find difficult and challenging^v.

In thinking of my maternity outside my own experience, I recalled theoretical and fictional texts that explore maternal experience/subjectivity (these include Adrienne Rich’s *Of Women Born* (1977), Julia Kristeva’s *Stabat Mater* (1986), Patricia Hill Collin’s *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976), Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1997), Lisa Baraitser’s *Maternal Encounter* (2009), Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2002), Bracha Ettinger’s *The Matrixial Borderspace* (2006)^{vi}). There is a wealth of literature focusing on maternal experience across the fields. Writing on experiences of maternity transcends disciplinary boundaries (sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, literature, philosophy), with the texts differing greatly in content and form. The texts that I include are mostly from the last forty years. These texts emerged out of the post-war period that spurred new thinking and writing on maternity from the perspective of women, and which started to

disrupt dominant maternal ideologies. The process of discovering and rediscovering these texts, then reading, contemplating, responding and writing about them has been an iterative, creative and living process. These texts connect at different points with the research. The connecting lines are partial, unstable, transient, overlapping, dynamic, multifarious and mutable; whether and how they connect is open to alternative and conflicting interpretations. Therefore, that which is presented is but one possible interpretation; tracing selected lines of a shifting pattern. The pattern follows the lines of maternal experience and subjectivity. The selected texts come together to illustrate particular challenges, conundrums contradictions, as well as the possibilities unleashed by using experiences in written texts that contemplate or explore maternal subjectivity and experience.

III

Art-encounter

I have struggled with my maternity and it has been a difficult journey to where I am now. Along the way there have been points of despair and great sadness. It was in the midst of the more wretched times, when I felt isolated and scared that I might leave my infant boy in the majority care of someone else, that I had my encounter with the art of Louise Bourgeois. It was not a single viewing of her work, rather a perpetual return to the images of her work (which I would not see first hand until some years later). It is difficult to write about an art-encounter after the (albeit recurring) ‘event’. It is not something that can be easily described or captured in a written text, if at all. It is maybe only possible to discuss its affects, what it did or continues to do, ‘Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*’ (Deleuze, 1994, p 139).

I will not attempt a full analysis of the affects or effects of the art-encounter here, except in general terms. Louise Bourgeois’ work may not be perceived as exclusively maternal in nature, however for me something happens when I see her work that moves me profoundly. It was not one single work, some more than others. It was an unspeakable something that I felt when I looked at and experienced her work. I do not see her maternity, nor mine. But her work translates a feeling, an emotion that spoke to my maternal-self. It connected with that hidden part of me that held the ball of sadness, regret,

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guilt, fear and hope that I associate(d) with my maternity. It provided a meditative pause that I would return to over time, leading to a questioning of maternity, of mine and of others in a hope of gaining some understanding of maternity, and in doing so generating understandings that may transcend the bounds of my own maternal experience. It is this last part that is important to this research:

With a genuine encounter... (o)ur typical ways of being in the world are challenged, our systems of knowledge disrupted. We are forced to thought. The encounter then operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities. It produces a cut, a crack. However this is not the end of the story, for the rupturing encounter also contains a moment of affirmation, the affirmation of a new world, in fact a way of seeing and thinking this world differently. This is the creative moment of the encounter that obliges us to think otherwise. Life, when it truly is lived, is a history of these encounters, which will always necessarily occur beyond representation. (O'Sullivan, 2006, p 1)

The road from my maternal story and art-encounter to the research has not followed a linear route. From this encounter, in the aftermath of the most difficult time in my maternal journey, I had the time and space to reflect on, among other things, the importance of my relationship to this art work.

As time passed I grappled with my experience and began to use texts to develop a dialogue, helping me to explore the relationship between maternity and art, seeing how changes in women's writing on their own experiences of maternity were concomitant with women artists recuperating the maternal from mostly male depictions of the Madonna and child that had littered the art world:

As mothers, as daughters, as artists, but most of all as women we all have a stake in displacing the bio-maternal determinism that lies hidden in the seemingly benign representations of maternity. Women artists have always worked in a Catch-22 situation and the catch is maternity – an “original” division of labor: women have babies: men create art. (Isaak, 1996, p 140)

Of course, women create art, and they have created works that contemplate maternity too in diverse and evocative ways^{vii}. Alongside reflecting on my experience and reading other texts, I started to seek out contemporary women artists who would speak to me about their work and their maternity. In the midst of this activity, the dialogue widened to include not only written texts, art work and my experience, but also the artists. This dialogue became actualised, or at least partially so, in notebooks that I started to keep, and as they developed, the writing and drawings held by these tiny pages in themselves not only capture some of this dialogue, but were/are part of it.

My experience, then, is used as a heuristic device to mediate the discussion between the macro and the micro, producing ideas concerned with art-encounters as potentially affective and transformative events that can catalyse unexpected effects.

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IV

Maternity and Art

Embarking on an inquiry into the relationship between maternity and art was an exploratory leap that has a direct link to the contemplation of my maternity and art-encounter. I was not only interested in the 'maternal' connection that I had with an artist's oeuvre, but I also began to question how women's experiences of maternity relate to *their* own art. Furthermore, this coincided with the development of my own art practice, which continues to be interested in the maternal. This section, then, is concerned with these aspects of post-encounter activity. Existing written texts were used to explore these relationships, before a series of interviews with 12 women artists were undertaken and filmed.

The interviews emerged from initial tentative meetings with women artists. As I was exploring my own encounter and starting to explore the place of art in my own maternal journey, I decided to take that 'exploratory leap' to speak with practising women artists about their maternity. This led to a vast array of discussions and reflections through the exchange of stories. The artists were interested in why I was pursuing this research, and so I retold my story. The women then shared their stories, their maternities and started to explore its relationship to their art in ways that were instantly connectable to the other parts of the research. Their informal reflections and insights on maternity and on its relationship to art provided the inspiration for the final piece of the puzzle, the collection or documentation of these discussions in interviews with 12 contemporary women artists. The decision to film the interviews came after the first meetings with some of the women who were so vibrant, diverse and engaging, that film seemed a medium that might capture some of this energy. The interviews are organised thematically and the transcripts and film extracts are analysed in this section. The film will be available for viewing online and it will create another space (alongside the written text) for further reflections by unknown others on the concepts that lie at the heart of this research – maternal experience, subjectivity, art and encounters.

These interviews are not to be understood as the 'method' of the research, but as practice. However, the recordings of the interviews, crucially, become an object for the research, sitting alongside the other objects. This combination of practice and object is

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thought of here as developing a form of praxis, capturing the dynamic nature of a number of ‘traversals’ between the activities that generate the different objects; between the core concepts themselves; and, finally, between the objects and the concepts.

V

Travelling Concepts

This research is exploratory in nature, starting from a desire based in personal experience to investigate maternity, experience, subjectivity, art and encounter. I have gone some way in setting out how this happened, which was through a series of activities which involved these concepts in interaction with objects. In understanding this approach, Mike Bal’s thesis, primarily found in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002) is highly relevant. Bal, in the context of writing about cultural analysis, takes us through a series of case studies to demonstrate the consequences of replacing paradigm and discipline based methodologies with a re-examination of concepts as a means to study cultural objects. In this text she described concepts as:

Mostly they are considered abstract representations of an object. But, like all representations, they are neither simple nor adequate in themselves. They distort, unfix, and inflect the object. To say something *is* an image, metaphor, story, or what have you – that is, to use concepts to label something – is not a very useful act. Nor can the language of equation – ‘is’ – hide the interpretative choices made. In fact, concepts are, or rather *do*, much more. If well thought through, they offer miniature theories, and in that guise, help in the analysis of objects, situations, states and other theories. (Bal, 2002, p 22)

Cultural objects when they are used as the subject of research or analysis are described by Bal as follows:

At first sight, the object is simpler than anthropology’s: a text, a piece of music, a film, a painting. But, after returning from your travels, the object constructed turns out to no longer be the ‘thing’ that so fascinated you when you chose it. It has become a living creature, embedded in all the questions and considerations that the mud of your travel splattered onto it, and that surround it like a ‘field’. (Bal, 2002, p 4)

Bal (2002) points out that concepts have a history of ‘travelling’ between disciplines, historical periods and contexts, and even cultures and that they are, in this sense dynamic^{viii}. Bal proposes that the counterpart of any given concept is the cultural text, work or ‘thing’ that constitutes the *object* of analysis. Concepts then help us to understand the object better. Bal is suggesting a methodological basis for the use of concepts as *method*. What this entails is an interaction between the concepts, object and the analyst. From this interaction or analysis that is or that generates this interaction, reflexivity may be triggered,

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which in turn may facilitate the generation of new thinking. Analysis is thus part of the ‘doing’:

Analysis, in pursuing its goal – which is to articulate the ‘best’ (most effective, reliable, useful?) way to ‘do’, perform, the pursuit of knowledge – puts... [concepts]... together with potential objects that we wish to get to know. (Bal, 2002, p 55)

This analysis involves the researcher moving or travelling with the concepts through different disciplines in interaction with the object. The researcher then learns more about the concept and the object of analysis from the different disciplines as they go, without claiming to know it all, the researcher occupies a luminal space:

While groping to define, provisionally and partly, what a particular concept may *mean*, we gain insight into what it can *do*. It is in the groping that the valuable work lies. (Bal, 2002, p 11)

Without knowing of it at the time, as my research developed intuitively towards the use of concepts in interaction with objects, Bal’s thesis is instantly relatable to the approach I took.

My concepts – maternity, experience, subjectivity, art and encounter are found in every section of this research and as seen in the diagrams 1 and 2 are at times conflated, such as in the case of art-encounter. They are all concepts that travel through many disciplines (for example fine art, art history, cultural analysis, philosophy, life sciences, obstetrics and religion). In this research, subjectivity is perhaps the mediating concept that connects maternity, experience, art and encounter. I say ‘perhaps’ as this is a work in progress and this is an observation based on recent thinking and writing.

The relationship between these concepts, the research and me has been and continues to be challenging and problematic. All of these concepts are found in everyday use,^{ix} holding different meanings for different people in different contexts; they are dynamic, historically and culturally contingent. They are used in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary contexts; they are approached in this research as concepts in Bal’s terms that are concerned with opening up debate rather than being apt for a reductionist definition. Using them in this way, as discursive tools, may be unsettling at times – as there can be no ‘resolution’, as such, but rather a continuing questioning, twisting and mutating that continues through out this thesis and beyond. As has been cited by others, many times before, it really is all about the *process*, about the moving through, about the travelling. There is no final destination.

For this research, the analysis lies in actually facing the challenges and problematics that arise from the interaction of the concepts with the objects. I would like

to end the current process by discussing one example that illustrates these problematics; that is, in the use of *experience*, a concept that I have found particularly troubling. It is perhaps because it is less dominating in terms of its presence in this thesis than maternity or subjectivity, which have whole segments devoted to them, and/or maybe because it mostly appears in this work as an adjunct to the ‘maternal.’ Furthermore, being a term I thought I ‘knew’, I have used ‘experience’ *unproblematically (for so long)*; it was part of my tacit knowledge, and I initially included it into the research as such. My use of it was initially lackadaisical, writing and talking about it in the context of ‘my maternal experience’ or ‘this research stems from experience,’ with no real attention being given as to what the term really means, even though I use it as fundamental to the conception of the research. But experience is as slippery and complex as any other key concept, as seen in the following text, where Colebrook discusses experience as understood by Deleuze:

Any idea that we use to explain experience itself is an event within experience. The risk of empiricism, though, is that we locate this experience as immanent to some ‘plane’. We tend to define experience as human experience, or consciousness or culture. We think of experience as what is present to us, as what is actual. We fail to realise that we are events within a much broader terrain of experience that extends well beyond that what we actively know. (Colebrook, 2002, pp 86-87)

In this sense, experience is just experience, not just *my* experience, experience *is* life – life as becoming, as interaction (Colebrook, 2002). It was by reading other texts that explore experience and in the practice of recalling and trying to write about my own experience that the problems started to surface. The issues appeared in the *interaction* (writing and reflecting) of the concept with these objects (texts, both existent and generated). In between this interaction, I was able to reflect on what I understood to be *experience* before I embarked on this interrogation, which was based on a version of experience as something that I owned, as if I were a vessel within which the experience took place (Colebrook, 2002). It was in the ‘groping around’ for other interpretations or ideas that I started to unpick my initial assumptions and think about it differently. This is only an example of how concepts are used in this work; my approach to *experience*, alongside the other key concepts, is interrogated throughout the research in an attempt to capture some of the ideas and different knowledges that have emerged in the practice and process of this research as these concepts have mingled with the objects. It is the grappling with these concepts, in their use, in their interaction with each other and the objects that constitutes the research.

Bal's conceptualisation of objects has helped to think through the activities which used the objects through which I undertook to explore maternity, experience, subjectivity art and encounter. I use both *existing* and *generated* objects, including written texts, art objects, interview transcripts and film, notebooks. I do not see any of the objects as passive, even if they are existent, as the process of reading, viewing or recalling are all active gestures that are 'new' each time this activity takes place, which manifests in the thinking and writing that they produce. The objects are all types of information that generate thinking which is documented while performing this research; they all have a function. The concepts and objects are used to develop a *dialogue* – with each other, the reader, the viewer and me, in order to create the space or the conditions where thinking and ideas about objects and concepts (maternity, experience, subjectivity, art and encounter) can emerge. This is ultimately the aim of the research.

ⁱ Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise an assemblage as: '...as in all things, there are lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitute an *assemblage*.' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p 4)

ⁱⁱ Integral to the approach of the research process has been the thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Their thinking, more than any other gave me the initial confidence and the *tools* to start crafting this research: 'You should not try to find whether an idea is just or correct. You should look for a completely different idea, elsewhere, in another area, so that something passes between the two which is neither in one nor the other. Now, one does not generally find this idea alone; a chance is needed, or else someone gives you one. You don't have to be learned, to know or be familiar with a particular area, but to pick up this or that in areas which are very different.' (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002, p 10)

ⁱⁱⁱ The use of concepts has been heavily influenced by Deleuze and his collaborative work with Guattari, especially in *What is Philosophy* (1994). Colebrook summarises this approach: 'Philosophers create concepts that, far from functioning on grounds or points of agreement and recognition, allow us to think of the difference, discontinuity, and chaos which surrounds and passes through us.' (Colebrook, 2002, p77-78)

^{iv} I would later read Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts* (2002), which was instantly relatable to this activity and its conceptualisation. A discussion of Bal's work is found later in this text.

^v I have recently given birth to my second child, now five months old. This has of course marked a change in my maternal experience from whence I embarked on this research. I am using a written and drawing diary as a method to reflect upon this very particular post-partum existence.

^{vi} Ettinger develops a singular handling of the maternal. She does not use her experience per se to theorise, neither does she use the maternal per se but rather uses a particular configuration of the maternal as a thinking apparatus (Ettinger, 2006). Her theory is connected in a unique way to the maternal that is important in the development of my understanding of maternity, especially in terms of how she uses concepts that are related to the intra-uterine to explore subjectivity-as-encounter, and importantly, the use of the ‘matrixial’ in the exploration of my art-encounter, an encounter that I identified as having a maternal-connection long before I conceived of this research.

^{vii} Artists such as Mary Kelly, Paula Rego, Helen Chadwick, Ellen McMahon, Lena Semic, Sarah Pucill, Christine Wilks, Whitney McVeigh, Frida Kahlo, Kiki Smith, Helen Sargeant, Cindy Sherman, Helen Knowles, Judy Glantzman, Louise Bourgeois, Monica Bock, Sarah Webb, Renée Cox, Deirdre Donoghue, Helena Walsh, Anna Furse, Hannah Wilke and Tracey Emin.

^{viii} It is worth noting that perhaps one of the reasons why I feel comfortable with this approach is due to an eclectic background. My education and work experience have in themselves been broad. I have been educated, have worked or have an interest in English literature, social work, Irish history, law, family therapy, sociological research, art practice and art history. All these influences, knowledges and experiences feed my thinking. I do not feel aligned to one discourse, or feel obliged to operate in the confines of one or other discipline, which is why Bal’s idea of ‘travelling’ seems apt, not only in terms of the use of concepts, but in terms of my academic and other experience.

^{ix} Throughout his work, Deleuze makes reference to the use of concepts and separates the every day use from the philosophical use, the first of which he accuses of being reductive and generalising. For a discussion see Claire Colebrook, 2002, p 15-18.

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