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ARTICLE

The C-Word: Motherhood, Activism, Art, and Childcare

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The ideals of second wave feminism questioned the family and attempted to reconstruct an understanding of motherhood as a social category. These questions have been overshadowed by a neoliberal discourse of childcare that is constructed around participation in the workplace for middle class women. The result is a clash of ideals and politics specific to the question of childcare: its labour, its distribution, and its reward. In this paper, we document our research-based artistic practice as it has evolved from activist campaigns for childcare in art schools to gallery-commissioned collaborations with publicly funded nurseries. We position our work against a context of other creative works (ranging from documentaries, films, art collectives, and animations) that explore experiences of motherhood in relation to the issue of childcare. These examples present counter-narratives, collective solutions, or art practice that attempt to challenge the dominant, neoliberal model of the mother and childcare. Some of these examples succeed in part; others pose questions; and most fail, though failure in this context provides gateways to expanded conversations and long-term future possibilities. We examine the intersection of art and activism, and explore how childcare is often considered a dirty word in art. With its inherent subjectivities of parent and child, the 'c-word' is often contained within the education department if engaged with as an issue at all in arts institutions. Childcare often lacks visibility if required by a practitioner in order to carry on their work. Yet for us, childcare forms the subject for an artistic practice.

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Introduction: Care, Labour, and Art

The raising of the child casts a net of labour far beyond the parent-child dyad or triad. The need for care, whether commencing with nannies in infancy, nursery workers in toddlerhood, or teachers and childminders in primary education, often results in a clash of political ideals and lived experience for the parent. How will care be distributed in the home? Who will care for the child if or when the parent/parents work outside of the home? Who will that carer be? How will they be paid? The responsibility for care relies on the parent. Yet, the implications of that care are societal in their reach.

This paper, a version of which was originally presented at the conference *Motherhood and Creative Practice* at London Southbank University on 1 June 2015, explores our individual experiences as artists and activists and connects them to experiences of motherhood around questions of childcare. We extend the discussion of our practice to examples in wider creative practice that explore childcare with a spirit of collectivity and solidarity. Some projects succeed in part for periods of time; many questions are posed; most of the projects fail in part or in whole in offering new models for childcare.

Angela McRobbie traces the 'troubled but nevertheless anchored connection between [1970s] feminism' and social democratic pro-active government policies, which promoted childcare to enable mothers into work outside of the home. Such aligned ideologies saw preschool as beneficial, both 'socially' and 'financially'.¹ For example, the National Childcare Campaign proposed a universal model for 24-hour childcare to serve married mothers, single mothers, mothers working full time, and those working shifts as a basic demand of the Women's Liberation Movement.² As a

¹ Angela McRobbie, 'Feminism, the Family and the New "Mediated" Maternalism' in *New Formations*, 80, 2013, p. 139. Further references to this article are given after quotations in the text.

² See 'Sheila Rowbotham: Sisterhood and After', (London: The British Library, undated) <<http://www.bl.uk/people/sheila-rowbotham>> (Accessed 27 January 2016).

direct result of the campaigns and activism of the Women's Movement, in particular with the Playgroup movement creating a provision for care in deprived areas of the UK, there was progress in terms of nursery places available. The number of children benefiting from funded early-years education has been on an upward trend, with 96% of 3 and 4 year olds in England and Wales reportedly accessing some childcare provision in a formal setting as of January 2015.³ (This access could be as little as three hours a week, and covers nurseries, preschools, and registered childminders). Though provision of childcare has expanded, the question remains as to the best model for care. McRobbie argues that the '*familiasation*' of the current state – seen in the granting of parental rights to gay and lesbian couples, and the privatization of childcare through the employment of nannies – has demonized the welfare state of communal networks for childcare and parental support outside of the home, such as youth clubs (McRobbie, 2013, p. 139). A third of maintained nursery schools in England, with their focus on high quality early education and integrated care, have been closed. The future of the remaining 400 maintained nursery schools is uncertain.⁴ Though we have more childcare places than ever in the UK, following McRobbie's argument, we also have less choice in childcare. Neoliberal governments promote the heteronormative family structure through childcare as a privatized, individual concern. Childcare is not promoted by the neoliberal agenda because it is good for the children or good for society. According to McRobbie in a neoliberal ideology, childcare is 'a subtle means of managing family life' (2013, p. 139). Childcare becomes an intrinsic service in the '*dispositif* of new maternal-familialism' which she goes on to argue 'sets new horizons for middle-class status on the basis of aspirational lifestyle, non-reliance on the state or on benefits and a female head of household'

³ 'National Statistics: Provision for Children Under 5 Years of Age', (London: Department of Education, January 2015) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/provision-for-children-under-5-years-of-age-january-2015>> (Accessed 13 March 2016)

⁴ 'Maintained Nursery Schools: The State of Play Report,' *Early Education* (London: The British Association for Early Childhood Education, March 2015) <<https://www.early-education.org.uk/sites/default/files/Nursery%20Schools%20State%20of%20Play%20Report%20final%20print.pdf>> (Accessed 13 March 2016).

who is doing it all (McRobbie, 2013, p. 140). In this context, the constructed service of childcare provides for a fee-paying parent so they may go to work outside of the home. The infrastructure that frames childcare is thus the product of political ideology, a reflection of a society's value of care labour which in turn intrinsically promotes both the right and the 'wrong kinds of family' (McRobbie, 2013, p. 139). Within art, we can explore childcare not as a service, but as a reflection of the ideology which services its infrastructure of provision. The subjectivities presumed inherent within discourses around childcare in art practice, discourses of the maternal, and of parenting, in our experience beleaguer childcare as a subject of art practice, making it a dirty word, the other c-word. Yet the complexities of childcare in relation to ideology enable childcare as subject for art practice to embrace this criticality, freeing it from its taboo, its subjective position, and dirty word status within art practice, and enable the interrogation of even broader ideological questions. As a subject for an art practice, the complexities beyond a one-size-fits-all childcare solution can be explored.

The Leeds Animation Workshop was a collective of animators and filmmakers in the North East of England begun in the 1970s who created work where childcare was explored as a necessary good and a multi-dimensional problem. Theorists and filmmakers Laura Mulvey's and Peter Wollen's film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), treats the negotiation of childcare and the politics of its infrastructure with the same anti-narrative complexity as the film's structure. The agit-prop photography and activism collective the Hackney Flashers organised exhibitions which presented images of the everyday experience of working class mothers in the East End of London in the 1970s, and argued the need for better childcare provision by the state. The Montreal-based Thee Silver Mount Zion Memorial Orchestra made a documentary film following their life on the road in 2012 as a globally touring band attempting to combine family life, equitable childcare, and deep political commitments in the age of Spotify.

Each of these examples demonstrates creative practitioners confronted with the issue of childcare, and devising discourses or alternative solutions that attempt to

imagine a better model. In this paper, we reflect first on our own activist campaigns which called for the re-instatement of childcare provision in UK art schools. These campaigns emerged from our experience of having children whilst attending art schools. We trace how this activism evolved into a collaborative, research-based artistic practice. Though the project emerged from our individual experiences, the exploration of motherhood in our practice has shifted to become invested in the systems and labour of care, rather than a subjective study of motherhood. As a result, we hope to avoid constructing motherhood as a privileged subjectivity, which as poet and critic Maggie Nelson writes, is: 'another position generally assumed to be, as [Jane] Gallop put it, "troublingly personal, anecdotal, self-concerned"'.⁵ Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh contend in *The Anti-Social Family* that leftist and feminist critiques have repeatedly used the nuclear heteronormative family as the starting point for their reflections of childcare infrastructure and the type of demands that are voiced.⁶ Acknowledging the subjectivity of motherhood that has instigated this research practice, we hope to extend our questions beyond the subjective to the societal.

The examples we explore in this paper illustrate the complexities involved in any critique and development of an infrastructural system of support of motherhood and care labour. Despite forty years passing since its making, the questions raised in Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's experimental film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) are far from being solved, neither at an intellectual level, nor on a practical level. For example: Mulvey and Wollen propose in the film whether nurseries are the solution to childcare needs? Are the individuals (usually women) who carry out the care labour fairly remunerated or recognised? What type of childcare do we (as parents, as feminists) want? Does the existence of childcare, as we know it, further a heteronormative, capitalist society? We cannot fully answer all of these questions in the space of this paper. But acknowledging the questions begins to unearth the complexity of childcare as a discursive issue. Herein, we explore how art provides a discursive space

⁵ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, (GrayWolf Press: Minneapolis, 2015), p. 40. Jane Gallop is quoted within Nelson's text though no further citation is provided. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

⁶ Michelle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, *The Anti Social Family* (London: Verso, 1991 (1982)).

where we can make these questions visible, and politicise the complex issues around childcare as a product of ideology.

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Childcare Models in Creative Practice

We turn first to several examples of cultural production and artistic works, in which the complexities involved in the issue of childcare and creative practice are explored or revealed. Leeds Animation Workshop is a not-for-profit, co-operative company, run by women, that makes, produces and distributes short animated films on social issues.⁷ It began as the Nursery Film Group, set up to produce an animated film: *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* (1976). The film was a direct response to the Women's Movement demand for 24-hour childcare. It reflected the personal experiences of some members of the group who were also campaigners, teachers or mothers. *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* constructs the children as the subjects who demand nursery places. The animated characters debate the benefits of a nursery: 'I know my mum wouldn't mind some time for herself if she knew we would be looked after proper. I just wish I could go to a nursery'; one remarks.⁸ They discuss their ideas for childcare at a campaign meeting presided over by three Chairbabies. The character construction acknowledges that childcare was seen then (and in large part, still is) as a woman's responsibility. In contrast, *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* argues that different children and different carers have different needs.

In 1978 the Nursery Film Group re-named itself as Leeds Animation Workshop, and went on to produce films on other social and educational issues, such as *Crops and Robbers* (1986), on the relations between aid and trade, and *Did I Say Hairdressing? I Meant Astrophysics* (1998), on equal opportunities in science, engineering and technology. In their body of work there is a clear effort to unpick complicated questions and facts, and to avoid solutions which are overly simplistic. Long-standing member of the Workshop, Terry Wragg, states: 'You

⁷ See <<http://leedsanimation.org.uk>> for the animations discussed within this paper.

⁸ 'Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!' (Leeds: Nursery Film Group, 1976).

can't just say, here is the nursery, it will solve all your problems. As always if you go deep into the problem and get to the very root of it, the very root of it is always the capitalist system'.⁹ All of the Workshop's projects underline that any solution can only go as far as indicating the underlying problematic.

By the 1990s, the number of nurseries and childcare had expanded. *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* was a campaign film – a call to arms – but its partially fulfilled prophecy still revealed systemic problems. As an alternative to the direct call for a pragmatic solution presented in *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!*, *Working With Care* (1999), explored not only how certain structures could reinforce mothers as the *natural*, main carers of children, but also the similarities between childcare and other types of care, such as elder-care, or care for those with disabilities. Wragg, reflecting on the Workshop's membership, states: 'We weren't all mothers at all' (Francke, 2016). Rather, the Nursery Film Group was composed of two mothers in a 'group of about half a dozen people' (Francke, 2016). 'But', Wragg observes, 'we all had caring responsibilities of some kind or another. By the time we made *Working With Care*, some of us had been looking after our own parents, some of us after our own children, some of us both. We felt that it was a feminist issue as well as a trade union issue. It was an issue for everybody' (Francke, 2016).

The Workshop's most recent film expands the network of childcare subjects to include the working conditions of some of its labourers. *They Call Us Maids: The Domestic Workers' Story* (2015) is an animated film commissioned by Pavilion, Leeds, and produced in consultation with Justice for Domestic Workers, a grass-roots organisation set up for and by migrant domestic workers to the UK. *They Call Us Maids* explores the conditions and struggle of overseas domestic workers in the UK, living with illegally low pay, few or no employment rights, and high working hours made possible through the administrative side-door of the Domestic Worker in a Private Household visa (a visa which holds conditions that often make a worker effectively trapped in an exploitative situation). Many members of Justice for

⁹ Andrea Francke, Interview with Terry Wragg (London, 1 March 2016). Further references to this interview are given after quotations in the text.

Domestic Workers care for their employer's children, having sought the employment in order to provide for their own children, whom they have often left behind in their countries of origin under the care of grandmothers or aunts. Seen in their historic context, spread over four decades, these three films reveal women's changing priorities as they address the need for childcare support, as well as the relationship of childcare in practice to feminist demands. The medium of animation enables them to present a prism of solidarity, that is, a tool to make visible layers of oppression and exploitation that reflect more complicated political issues that can be unearthed under the umbrella of childcare.

In 2009, Jessica Moss, a Montreal-based violinist and member of the band, Thee Silver Mount Zion Memorial Orchestra, gave birth to a son, Ezra, with her partner and bandmate, lead singer Efrim Menuck. Confronted by the reality of life in a globally touring band with an infant, the couple's partnership in art and in parenting faced a drastic shift, with both partners defaulting to gender-typical roles of the heteronormative family. Menuck was rehearsing daily with his other band, internationally acclaimed post-rock group Godspeed You Black Emperor! and preparing to tour with Thee Silver Mount Zion. Moss was at home in their modest apartment in the Mile End neighborhood of Montreal caring for the baby. As the divisions of labour in their partnership shifted from an equitable collaboration to a gendered binary, the couple decided to take their toddler son on the road for a tour in 2012. Documented in *Come Worry With Us!* (Klodawsky, 2013), the couple try to reconcile the uncomfortable meshing of a young child and a large band who needs to tour in order to make ends meet. While the films of the Leeds Animation Workshop seek to make visible the complexity of childcare through the medium of animation, whereas Klodawsky's film aims to explore childcare as a complex problem in the specific case of one heterosexual couple whom are both creative practitioners through the medium of documentary.

While we watch the tour bus cross North America (the bus is a new expense for the sake of the nanny and child; previously the band travelled in vans they drove themselves), we know the nanny only by her first name (Amber). We assume she does not have children of her own for they are not seen or mentioned, but perhaps she does. Yet, here is a woman who has signed up to care for a toddler who is not her

own, twenty-four hours a day, in a combination of the confined and moving space of a tour bus, seedy music venues, and highway rest stops. (Moss acknowledges Amber's job is incredibly hard, 'you're working all the time. . . there are no days off') (Klodawsky, 2013).¹⁰ When the childcare is shared on the road with a parent, it is almost always shared between Amber and Moss. Menuck has to concentrate on making the show happen. This is not to say he is portrayed as an overly egotistical male rock star – quite the opposite, he is mostly likeable, gentle, a man who *says* he wants to have a balance of care and creative practice with his partner. The experience of the nanny is echoed in an account of another Montreal band, the Arcade Fire, whose lead singer Win Butler and bandmate Regine Chassagne had a child together in 2013. Josh Eells writes of Butler tending to the baby, playing a game where he pretends the baby is an iPhone, during an interview for *Rolling Stone*:

Butler takes the baby away from his ear and starts scrolling down his belly – swiping e-mails and deleting them. The baby laughs. "He loves it!" Butler says. Then one of the nannies takes him outside for a walk. (Chassagne, Arcade Fire's co-bandleader, isn't quite as doting in public, but it might be because she's been keeping the baby with her all night, sharing her hotel bed with him so Butler can get a full night's sleep in a separate room).¹¹

The nanny remains nameless; the mother steps up so the father can take centre stage; the system carries on.

Moss and Menuck struggle to make a modest income with the cost of touring, dwindling sales in the age of online streaming software such as Spotify, and the costs of childcare. In a scene of a tense domestic conversation between Menuck and Moss in their kitchen, the couple discuss how to proceed financially as a band with the child in tow. To Moss, the cost of providing care for the child seems worth

¹⁰ Helene Klodawsky, *Come Worry With Us* (Montreal: CatBird Films, 2013).

¹¹ Josh Eells, 'The Unforgettable Fire: Can the Arcade Fire Be the World's Biggest Band?' in *Rolling Stone* (1200), 16 January 2014 <<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/the-unforgettable-fire-can-arcade-fire-be-the-worlds-biggest-band-20140116>> (accessed 3 March 2016).

the benefit of being on the road. But she is resigned. This is a band that distributes profits equally amongst all members; that pays for the nanny collectively; that will not charge over \$50 for a ticket to a gig. Yet Menuck refuses to accept grants for musicians from the Canadian government ('it's not government's role to subsidise failing bands'), and Moss looks quietly pained as she accepts her musical career, as she knows it, slips away with her choice of motherhood. Should it come as a surprise that Moss faces having to get a normal job for the first time in ten years? This, after all, is what grown-ups have to do when they have children, and their centre of care shifts from themselves to a small child. And yet, we want Moss to make it as a musician. We echo the film's question: 'Why aren't there many women rock musicians over 35?' (Klodawsky, 2013). Why do children and the life of a touring musician have to be so at odds? Moss herself reflects on this privilege of the struggle, reflecting on her good fortune to have access to healthcare and education. Is childcare a right? Is childcare the answer to combine creative practice and parenting?

iii

Art Schools, Nurseries, and Activism: Chelsea College of Art and *The Nursery* (2010)

In the experience of the authors of this paper, politicisation has been intensified as a result of two privileged experiences.¹² One, the experience of motherhood in the UK (where we are entitled to free, universal healthcare and midwifery services, for example); and two, the experience of attending graduate degrees in UK art schools. Despite these privileged subjectivities, we each began activist campaigns to save or re-instate childcare provision within the art schools, both because we believed it important to our own and our colleagues' possibility to continue study and creative practice, and because we believed collectively in the possibility and benefit of chil-

¹² For the next section of the paper, the voice of the writer shifts between 'I' and 'we'. Early, individual projects of the two authors later became collectively viewed under the umbrella of our collaborative title, *Invisible Spaces of Parenthood* (ISP). For the discussion on Chelsea College of Art and UAL London (2009–10), 'I' refers to Andrea Francke. For the discussion on The Royal College of Art 'I' is Kim Dhillon. Following the discussion of *Crib Notes* (2010–), collaborative projects since *Creche Course* (2014) refer to the authors as 'we'.

dren, parents, carers, and childcare within the art school as an institution and space for debate of ideas.

I (Andrea Francke) was a student on the MA in Fine Arts at the Chelsea College of Art and Design in 2009 when the University of the Arts London announced closure of its nursery amidst a wave of budget cuts. I had taken a year and half off of my MA degree after having my son Oscar in 2008 but felt confident in going back to study art, in part because the University provided (fee-paying) childcare in the form of an onsite nursery. I interpreted that, in some way, the existence of a nursery demonstrated that the University acknowledged that artists can be mothers and mothers can be artists. The UAL nursery was based at the London College of Communication at Elephant and Castle and provided childcare for staff and students of the five art colleges that UAL comprised at the time. (These were: Chelsea College, LCC, London College of Fashion, Camberwell School of Arts, and Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design). Roughly 60 children were registered in the nursery, both full time or part time. Parents and nursery staff organised a campaign and protested against the nursery's closure, but to no avail. The nursery was closed in 2009.

I was struck by the lack of solidarity by the Students' Union, and many fellow students, at the time. The University pushed through closure in the midst of other cuts. There was a general feeling that if something needed to be cut, the nursery was an obvious solution. Common responses to our pleas were that we had made a personal decision to have children, and childcare was a personal responsibility. There was an over-riding sentiment that one cannot be a mother and an artist, so there was little point of presenting a illusion of equality. As a reaction to the lack of solidarity amongst the student population with the campaign, a reaction fueled by anger, I set up a utopian nursery as a temporary space during the MA degree show. I intended that the space, *The Nursery* (2010) would at the very least make us, the parents, visible. As an art space, *The Nursery* forced my own student community to acknowledge the parents amongst them, whom they had previously ignored. The exhibition map, a space of much contention amongst competitive graduates, marked an entire room as *The Nursery*. I gained authorisation from the insurers and the College Health and

Safety officer to have children on site.¹³ I designed and built all of the furniture and toys myself with the advice of the staff of the now-closed nursery, a process that enabled us to think about possibilities for improved future childcare provision. During the project, I printed sets of texts and photographs which documented the history of the nursery and its recent closure.

The Nursery (2010) could not function as a real nursery or even a crèche facility (it did not have the staff or funding to do so), but it was a place where parents with their children, nursery staff, students without children, or any public visitor could use. Due to a University Health and Safety policy, children are not regularly allowed on site at Chelsea College of Art and Design. This contributes to the invisibility of parenting identities in the art school. Many of the nursery workers, and past and present users of the nursery came to spend the day and engaged with visitors. They would share stories about the feminist battle that set up the nursery in the first place during the 1980s and the impact it had on the number of women in the teaching body of the college. Other visitors, usually women, would bring their children into the space to confront them with the sacrifices they had made because of the lack of childcare or equal parenting arrangements. To put a nursery, its potential, and its infrastructure, on display also made visible the nursery workers who usually perform their work in complete isolation from those without children. The project emerged from a very personal position of frustration, but revealed the impact that nursery infrastructure had in the mechanism of the college. Access is not an individual issue in that it determines the composition of a community and thus simultaneously construct its ideological positions. Access issues have become increasingly problematic in the UK in recent years due to tuition fee increases above the previous ceiling of £9000 since the coalition government's U-turn on a Liberal Democratic 2010 campaign promise, the cost of student loans, and the cost of unpaid internships. These barriers perpetuate assumptions of who produces culture and who consumes it.

¹³ For some discussion on the hostile relationship of Health and Safety policy and children in art schools see Kim Dhillon, 'Invisible Labour: Care Provision for Infants and Children at UK Art Schools' in *We Need to Talk About Family: Essays on Neoliberalism, The Family, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Roberta Garrett, Angie Voela, Tracey Jensen (London: Cambridge Scholars, 2016).

After *The Nursery* at Chelsea, I created the umbrella term for the project's future manifestations: *Invisible Spaces of Parenthood* (ISP, 2010–ongoing). Initially, ISP focused on issues around motherhood and childcare in the art world. As part of a Common Knowledge residency at The Showroom in 2012, I organised a series of public discussions and workshops. *How to Support the Artist / Mother / Father?* was co-chaired by Martina Mullaney (of the project *Enemies of Good Art* (2009–ongoing) with guest speakers Nikki O'Rourke (Culture Baby) and Dhillon. (This was our first meeting and the seed for our future collaboration).

In early 2010, three months after the birth of my daughter, I (Kim Dhillon) set up *Crib Notes* at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. *Crib Notes* had a simple premise: a talks and tours programme for parents and carers of children under age 5 of the main exhibition in the gallery. Having a child, my world had shrunk and I disliked traversing London with a pram and a baby who needed feeding. I still wished to see art and visit galleries. The education department of the gallery, then led by Caro Howell, embraced the programme and it has run successfully for six years.

The transcription of the discussion at the Showroom, *How to Support the Artist / Mother / Father?*, shows how the implementation of solutions need to work in parallel with a permanent self-reflexive process on consequence.¹⁴ The hours at which *Crib Notes* ran – late morning, mid-week – were chosen for logistics. These hours tended to fit the schedules of parents with young babies, and the gallery had additional staff available for our un-funded programme. But, did the hours reinforce the lack of visibility of the children and parents? Mullaney felt 'politically, [parents and artists] should demand to be seen' so as to 'become part of the norm' not divided, and not apologizing (ISP, 2012 p. 57). The emerging strands between pursuing change at a grass-root level through activism, whilst also using art and writing practices as a reflective and experimental space where we can publicly and collectively examine them has since then become one of the characteristics of ISP.

¹⁴ Andrea Francke, *Invisible Spaces of Parenthood: A Collection of Pragmatic Propositions for a Better Future* (London: The Showroom, 2012). Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

iv

The Royal College of Art, the Jay Mews Nursery (1968–80), and the Campaign to Re-instate It

The Royal College of Art is a post-graduate only institution of art and design in London, Highly regarded with a leading international reputation, its student body is older, and arguably more likely to have children than their younger counterparts at Chelsea College of Art. Yet, as at UAL, when I (Kim Dhillon) began my PhD there in 2009 (whilst seven months pregnant with my first child), there was no nursery or childcare provision for students or staff. The lack of onsite childcare was coupled with a lack of childcare funding grants for postgraduate students in the UK. For example, the Parents' Learning Allowance and Childcare Grants, are solely for undergraduates.¹⁵ The lack of care provision and childcare funding at the RCA reveal a lack of infrastructure to support parent students in the art school. Even more telling of the institution's attitude to parents and children within the space of the art College however, was a policy, which until 2013 banned children from entering all spaces of the College beyond the public café and public galleries, 'along with pets and bicycles. . .[which are] also prohibited'.¹⁶ This policy was particularly restrictive to single parents studying in the College, who needed to arrange offsite care for their children prior to entering the College spaces. As a result, children and, by extension, parenting, were by 2009, invisible and increasingly isolated from the other *work* carried out within the academic setting of the art school.

In the 1970s, children, parents, and the RCA were not so stratified.¹⁷ An informal crèche was instigated at the College in 1968 by two female students, Jane Furst and Carolyn Garnet-Lawson, each of whom had a young child. The crèche was subsequently embraced by the College and its progressive Rector at the time, Sir Robin Darwin,

¹⁵ 'Postgraduate students who are parents are not eligible for the same loans and grants as undergraduate students, such as the Parents' Learning Allowance or Childcare Grant. However, you may be entitled to some funding from other sources'. 'Funding for Students with Children', Royal College of Art, 2013.

¹⁶ Royal College of Art Handbook 2013, p. 30.

¹⁷ For a discussion on the rise and fall of nursery and childcare provision in UK art schools, see also Dhillon 'Invisible Labour'.

who referred to the children as 'junior recruits' of the College (Royal College of Art, 1968).¹⁸ Through the 1970s the crèche evolved into a nursery for students, advertised in the prospectus and staffed by trained nursery nurses. By the early 1980s however, numbers of parents using the service dropped, and a change in rector to one less socially-minded, led to its closure during building renovations, never re-opened. The rectorship was amplified by the Thatcher years in Britain which promoted the individual as an independent entity responsible for managing its own needs (McRobbie, 2013, p. 141), in which political ideology may have impacted on the number of mothers/parents studying in higher education.

As a result, parent-students at the RCA now experience a clash of ideals and infrastructure in the College. In 2009, my colleague Dr. Jessica Jenkins started a childcare campaign, but abandoned it after reticence and resistance from the university administration of the pro-rector of operations' office. Since 2009, Jenkins and I each carried out several surveys to measure the desire and demand for childcare amongst students. Frustrations ranged from logistic challenges of balancing care, study, and creative practice to a rupture and distance of their childcaring responsibilities and their place of creative work. One expressed: 'I would like my daughter to have an idea of what I do, and where I work'.¹⁹ The surveys were part of a campaign to re-instate childcare on site. At the time, I perceived the desired goal as a return to the crèche that Furst and Garnet-Lawson initially set up. Colleagues who were undertaking PhDs with young children relocated to Berlin and Cairo, working abroad and commuting to London for tutorials, because childcare was readily available there, of higher quality, and more affordable to them. This privileged option of travel, and freedom of movement, whilst carrying with it upheavals of work and family life with young children, arguably presents the situation as determined by access, both access to the College and access to the best available childcare solution. A PhD student was reprimanded in an email from her department head, when the student

¹⁸ Royal College of Art, Inaugural Meeting of College Court (London: Royal College of Art, 1968).

¹⁹ Kim Dhillon and Jessica Jenkins, Surveys with Royal College of Art MA and Research Students and Staff (London, 2009–2014).

attended a cross-department lecture with her sleeping newborn, though she had obtained permission from the speaker beforehand. There was (and still is) no official Maternity Leave policy, instead forcing students to take undetermined Leave of Absence with unspecified return dates at which point an interview is undertaken to re-enroll. Lacking visibility of parents and children in the College, sneaking children in as if a threat to the learning or working environment, arose a feeling that children were contraband. This seemed a dire situation, with a stratified body of student parents amidst a stratified College.

I aimed for the campaign to unite with the student government, and three consecutive student councils (first led by Ola Micerka in 2013; then Tom Gottelier and Ritika Karamani in 2014; and Miloslav Vorlicek and Ritz Wu since 2015) all took up the cause, advocated for the rights of parents and mothers to College councils, and supported my campaign to re-instate the nursery. With the backing of the student government, and with the intention of establishing continuity of the campaign between the 12-monthly terms of the student presidents and vice-presidents, I formally established the Parent and Family Society. Under this title, I independently organised several meetings between September 2013 and May 2014 with the Pro Rector of Operations, Jane Alexander, and succeeded in negotiating for the College to overturn the ban on children to enter College spaces, albeit for a 12-month probationary period. This was a small but important victory. The cry went out: What do we want? The call came back: Nurseries! After-school Care! Our children in studios! Parent-run spaces! When do we want it? Now! The campaign was impassioned but lacking in unity. Some students were willing to pay for childcare if we could persuade the College to provide it. Others felt that it should be included in their fees, a barrier to learning if it was not. Some wanted care nearer their homes; the idea of traveling to South Kensington with a baby undesirable or impractical, and art students could rarely afford rent in SW7 in 1968, let alone in 2010. The ages of children ranged from newborns to school-age. The RCA had also expanded its footprint and was now spread across two sites: the original campus across from Hyde Park, and a new purpose-built space in Battersea which housed sculpture and painting. The College

resigned that these complexities, amidst a climate of rising costs and cutting budgets, and a relatively small student body (the College has less than 1500 students, in comparison with neighboring Imperial College London, with a student body 16000 and an onsite, full time nursery for staff and students), made a solution unviable and gave reason to do nothing. These complexities required the activist campaign to respond in a new way, though this only became clear in hindsight.

In much of our collaborative, research-based artistic practice exploring issues of childcare up to this point, we returned often to two research questions. One: what happened to the infrastructural developments and models of care that were legacies of second wave feminism? And two: do we need to reinstate such models, or imagine new ones? By this point in our activist campaigns at both Chelsea and the RCA, the answer to the first question had become glaringly obvious. Neoliberalism happened. Patriarchy never left. An ideology which saw no communal benefit in children in the creative work place, nor a social responsibility to provide care provision for the students dominated. Children were a choice. Caring for them was a responsibility borne to the one who chose to have the child. It was a responsibility to be carried out, paid for, and organised by the individual.

The answer to the second question became equally apparent, though a model to suit all demands and desires still evades us. New models must be imagined. But, what might they look like? Who might staff them? Who would pay for it? Who would use it? How would they do so? Can we imagine a possibility where care might be an integral part of the infrastructure, and what changes might result?

Our experiences and the campaigns we were each involved in to demand childcare again within art schools led us to organize *Creche Course*, a conference held at the Showroom in January 2014. Within *Crèche Course*, where speakers included Furst; her now adult daughter, Vanessa King; feminist art historian Dr. Catherine Grant (who used the onsite nursery at Goldsmiths College); Professor Richard Wentworth (who had studied at the RCA when the crèche was first instated); ourselves; and Gottelier, we debated the implications of having childcare in an art school, and imagined the different models of childcare that could be possible if art schools embraced

childcare as an essential provision. Here, the call for childcare shifted from activism to artwork. During the conference, the gallery space was packed with over 60 attendees, ranging in age from 8 month old twins, to RCA-alumnus in their 70s. Despite the success of the conference in terms of participation and attendance, no solutions were met. What transpired instead was the diversity in parent' desires and demands for how to care for their children whilst carrying out creative practice. While some wanted children in the studio with them, others felt this prohibitive to practice and wanted separate but near facilities. Some wanted flexibility in location, as many now commute to work or study. Needs ranged widely depending on the age of children, and whether they were in school or not.

V

Childcare Between Art and Activism

As with the complexities of problems revealed in the early stages of our activist campaigns, it became increasingly clear that we could not solve the problems with activism. Some peers have tried and developed new models which succeed in part and raise the visibility of children and childcare in the art world. Mullaney's *Enemies of Good Art* (2009–ongoing) carries on in its campaign for a crèche at Tate Modern, so that artist-mothers and artist-fathers can study exhibitions without child in tow. *Crib Notes* continues so parents and carers have option to study exhibitions with child. (Children are of course, not banned from public galleries, though the norms of gallery-going behavior suggest children are neither particularly *welcome* nor compatible beyond art trollies and interaction exhibits). Claire Louise Staunton, a London-based curator, founded Little Kunst in 2014 to set up gallery-paid pop-up crèche services. Chicago-based artist Christa Donner set up Cultural ReProducers in 2012 as a multi-disciplinary creative and community-based practice seeking to support arts professionals across disciplines who are also parents. At present, no London art schools offer onsite childcare, with the exception of Goldsmiths College, part of the larger University of London, and whose nursery was saved by a business plan takeover led by Graham Gaskell, the Chief Executive of the Students' Union in 2010. What will the landscape of the art world look like if we succeeded in building nurseries in all art

schools and galleries? Would the societal relationship to children, parents, and carers change with its increased visibility?

Nelson sympathises with Gallop as she recounts how Gallop received a 'lashing' from art historian Rosalind Krauss in a seminar in which Gallop presented work to students that featured photographs of herself as 'a pudgy mother in love with her son' which, to Krauss presented a 'narcissism that makes one think that an utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others is something unique, or uniquely interesting' (TA, p. 41). 'Maternity', Nelson interpreted Krauss's 'shaming', 'had rotted [Gallop's] mind' (TA, p. 41). Working with childcare as subject matter is seen as career suicide in the current art world. The subjectivities, the narratives, the word itself often contains our work to the departments of education, away from the main programming. In art, childcare is a dirty word. Perhaps that is because the art world, like the real world, is deeply patriarchal. Childcare is a reflection of ideology and a product of society. The complexities invoked in childcare demand art in order to explore it fully. To question childcare often unavoidably comes from subjectivity, or from subjective experience. Mulvey's and Wollen's son Chad was school age by the time they made *Riddles of the Sphinx*, though Mulvey had been observing the close relationship of her sister and her sister's two year old daughter.²⁰ But childcare, maternity, and motherhood as idea need not stay in the subjective for their reach is societal.

In the autumn of 2014, I (Dhillon) devised and led *Radical Pragmatics*, a week-long workshop for interdisciplinary MA students from the Royal College of Art. *Radical Pragmatics* sought to create practical solutions to reimagine workplace childcare in an art school today. Despite commitment and ambition from the students, we could not escape that we were operating within the art school as a structure. Nelson, invoking Tibetan American Buddhist scholar Pema Chodron, writes 'Perhaps it's the word *radical* that needs rethinking. But what could we angle ourselves toward instead, or in addition? Openness?' (TA, p. 27). At present, any pragmatic solution

²⁰ Scott MacDonald in *A Critical Cinema 2* (Berkeley, New York, and London: University of California Press, 1992), p. 335.

we arrive at still exists under the capitalist, patriarchal system which problematises care labour in its relationship to society. Though not speaking on childcare specifically, writer Claire Vaye Watkins summarises the current landscape thus: 'I have built a working miniature replica of the patriarchy in my mind. I would like very much to bust it up or burn it down. But I am afraid I don't know how. Though I do have some ideas'.²¹ Activism aims for a specific goal as an endpoint. Until a better system is arrived at, art provides a potentiality within which ideas can be explored and debated. Joan Didion, comment on the Women's Movement's critique of literature as 'sexist' writes in 1972: 'That fiction has certain irreducible ambiguities seemed never to occur to these women, nor should it have, for fiction is in most ways hostile to ideology'.²² So too art, like fiction, is hostile to ideology. Yet the art world, like the art school, is another structure within a repressive, ideological system. What can be done? Within any structure under patriarchy, ideals can critique, and potentially overcome, ideology. To paraphrase Vaye Watkins, to build something better, we need to burn this system to the ground (*OP*, 2015). Two things can do that: revolution and art. Once the system has gone, art can imagine what might go in its place.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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²¹ Claire Vaye Watkins, 'On Pandering' in *Tin House*, (Brooklyn and Portland: Publishers Group West, 23 November 2015).

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