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How to Cite: Marchevska, E 2016 Performing Everyday Maternal Practice: Activist Structures in Creative Work. *Studies in the Maternal*, 8(2): 11, pp. 1–14, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/sim.235>

Published: 15 December 2016

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Studies in the Maternal*, which is a journal published by the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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POSITION PIECE

Performing Everyday Maternal Practice: Activist Structures in Creative Work

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There is a gradual, yet sustained increase in creative practices, which explore maternal everyday experience in various mediums and formats. In this article, I am focusing on a contemporary trend of innovative performative strategies explored by creative practitioners in order to stage the spheres of maternal invisibility. This trend is in a intergenerational dialogue with artwork created almost four decades ago, as an early response to female objectification by art institutions. Current artistic consciousness-raising maternal projects similarly share personal experiences within a more public space, to provide focus on personal and social injustice.

May Dodge – My Nan She's 92

I call her Plum She calls me

Pudding

She made me the most beautiful/baby clothes – white crocheted

she made them for me a few/years ago – She said at the time

“I've made them for you now/because – by the time you have a/baby

– I'll be making clothes/for angels.

Dear Nanny I'm not afraid anymore – Life's fantastic – who'd have

thought/I could make angels –

for you

They're waiting/XXX¹

In dialogue/In opposition

This article is an attempt to summarise some of the key issues that were raised during the conference *Motherhood and Creative practice: Maternal Structures in creative work* that took place in June 2015, at London South Bank University. To begin with, it is important to explain the intergenerational aspect of this event. The conference was co-conceived in early September 2014 by Professor Valerie Walkerdine, a prominent scholar whose work shaped feminist histories in UK, and myself, an early career scholar who has recently completed her PhD. It was a dialogue that emerged over a friendly lunch; we realised that both of us struggled to understand the silencing of the maternal in contemporary art discourse. We were both excited by the prospect of organising a conference that would bring together some of the significant figures of the maternal art movement and a group of young scholars and early-career artists. We felt that the intergenerational dialogue around maternal art needs to be revisited. In response to contemporary political and social disarray we need to keep asking: What struggles are still ongoing, what was won, what needs to be won again?

Earlier this year, just six months after the conference, the performance artist Marina Abramović said that having children would have been 'a disaster for her work'.

¹ Tracey Emin. *May Dodge, My Nan, 1963–93*.

In an interview with the German newspaper Tagesspiegel translated by ArtNet, she said that children hold women back in the art world.² In a similar vein, Tracey Emin, interviewed in *The Independent*, said: 'There are good artists that have children. Of course there are. They are called men.'³ According to these artists, the art and the maternal are in stark opposition. Their statements resurrect the old dilemma of whether it is possible to be both a dedicated artist and a 'good' mother. They also point to the difficulties in contemporary representation of feminist motherhood.⁴

However, there is a perspective that was lacking from the public discourse that surrounded these statements. Both Abramović and Emin often tap into their maternal lineage. They also create work that is informed by feminism and intergenerational dialogue and which actively reflects on termination as an aspect of the maternal.⁵ As Mary Kelly states in a recent interview: '... right now, there's a kind of been there, done that mentality that risks losing everything we've gained so far, simply through lack of vigilance.'⁶ So, why then, as women and artists, are we returning to the question: Is the maternal an impediment to our art practice?

Performing the maternal: Motherhood and Creative practice conference

One of the most valuable sessions during the *Motherhood and Creative practice: Maternal Structures in creative work* conference was the final summary, when keynote speakers and discussants (Griselda Pollock, Bracha Ettinger, Faith Wilding, Irina Aristarkhova and Lisa Baraitser) came together to address the participants (**Figure 1**).

² <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jul/26/marina-abramovic-abortion-children-disaster-work>.

³ Alexander, Ella. Tracey Emin: 'There are good artists that have children. They are called men'. *Independent* 2014. Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/tracey-emin-there-are-good-artists-that-have-children-they-are-called-men-9771053.html> (Accessed on: 22 May 2016).

⁴ Liss, Andrea. *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. p. xv.

⁵ Corby, Vanessa. Something to show for it? Preliminary notes on termination and creativity in the work of Tracey Emin. In: Pollock, Griselda and Turvey-Sauron, Victoria, (eds.) *The sacred and the feminine: imagination and sexual difference. New encounters: arts, cultures, concepts*. London, I B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007. pp. 213–229.

⁶ Kelly, Mary. 23 Questions for Conceptual Artist Mary Kelly. In: *Blouin Artinfo*. 2012. Available from: http://www.houldsworth.co.uk/files/artist_press_1387297058_06_kelly_blouinartinfo_2012.pdf (Accessed on 20 May 2016).

The need for intergenerational discussion on maternal reality, solidarity and encounter as concepts in creative practice, and feminism emerged strongly. There is a gradual, yet sustained increase in creative practices, which, starting from the challenges posed by the above concepts, explore maternal everyday experience in various mediums and formats. The conference supported this trend, with 120 participants registered to attend, and more than 60 international presenters, a mixture of academics, artists and activists. They were all engaged in discussing work informed by feminist traditions, profoundly interrogating personal experiences of sexual difference and patriarchal social forms that cut across all disciplines.

However, what stood out to me, as one of the conference organisers, was a contemporary trend of innovative performative strategies explored by creative practitioners in order to stage the spheres of maternal invisibility. This trend stood in intergenerational dialogue with artwork created almost four decades ago, as an early response to female objectification by art institutions. Andrea Liss, in this same



Figure 1: Griselda Pollock talking during the 'Motherhood and creative practice' conference, 2 June 2015 Image by Christa Donner.

journal raised this issue and wrote that 'motherhood is too obvious in the sense of being too visible, too seen and thus turned into the obscene. In either case, motherhood continues to be looked upon and looked over as a problem that will not go away, as an embarrassment.'⁷ As Kathy Battista writes in her book, *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London* (2012)⁸, a number of women artists in the 1970s enacted the apparent absence of their own bodies in their work, at least in part as a means of escaping a visual language that was felt to be dominated by men's images of women's bodies as (sexual) objects. Conceptual artist Mary Kelly was particularly influential in this respect, after she exhibited a series of object-traces of her experience of motherhood, *Post-Partum Document*, at the ICA in 1976; this included diary text, analytical drawings relating to her son's development, and framed nappy stains juxtaposed with feeding charts. Kelly demonstrated that dialogues engaged in questions of women's bodies – in this instance, of a labouring body – could also take place in forms other than live presence. Kelly raised this issue in her conference keynote and discussed how her creative work over a lifetime shows how the feminist body can be expressed in live action, but also in 'vacated' installations.

From the conference participants working in creative practice came the clear impression that they still face the same struggles in relation to art institutions that were experienced by 1970s feminist artists. In addition to this, many young artists at the conference insisted on presence and visibility of the maternal body as a vital form of resistance to the invisibility and silencing of maternal creative work. There is a reinvigorated interest in feminist mothering and strengthening the social, personal, and political power of mothers through activists' performative interventions. Art in their case is a materialization or public manifestation of the creativity that underlies maternal everyday experience.

⁷ Liss, A., (2013). Maternal Aesthetics: The Surprise of the Real. *Studies in the Maternal*. 5(1), p. 1. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/sim.32>.

⁸ Battista, Kathy. *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London*, I. B. Tauris 2013.

Maternal everyday: performativity of care and labour

A woman on her knees vigorously scraping the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum. Smell of detergent, water spilt out of a bucket onto the concrete steps of a museum with a collection of nearly 50,000 works of art that span 5,000 years. Resistance through repetition of the act of cleaning, servility and maintenance. The artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles voices the frustration in her manifesto:

I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order). I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I 'do' Art. Now I will simply do these everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art.⁹

Barbara Katz Rothman writes about the language and concepts used by current neo-liberal ideology in labelling the maternal. She says that:

An ideology can let us see things, but it can also blind us, close our eyes to our own lived reality, our own experiences. . . The ideologies of patriarchy, technology and capitalism gives us our vision of motherhood while they block our view, gives us a language for some things while they silence us for others.¹⁰

It is definitely true that one way to undercut the power of any group is to obscure the truth of their experience. And while we see an expansion of women's opportunities and economic roles, it seems that all of this is built on a critical void of exclusion of maternal everyday reality.

In 1969, following the birth of her first child, Ukeles wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* as a challenge to the oppositions between art and life, nature and culture, and public and private. Her work openly questioning hierarchies of different forms of work, especially of everyday housework. As Knight summarises:

⁹ Ukeles, Mierle Laderman, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*, 1969.

¹⁰ Rothman, Barbara Katz. *Beyond mothers and fathers: Ideology in a patriarchal society*. In: *Mothering: Experience, Ideology, and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Forcey, 1994. pp. 139–157. New York: Routledge.

Frustrated by the way her responsibilities as a mother and housewife were regarded as a distraction to her work as an artist, she sought to overlap the various activities in her life, drawing on the reality of her experience to test the boundaries of art.¹¹

We see this tendency re-emerge today, in artists and activists who deal with the maternal as the subject of their work. From carnivalesque protest as a form of efficacious public performance to baby ensembles and breastfeeding caravans, we see work created from and about the everyday, using DIY creative strategies to highlight raw maternal experience. Lenka Clayton developed the conceptual piece *An Artists Residency in Motherhood* to bring together her home life as a mother of a one-year old and her life as practicing artist. Similarly to Ukeles and Kelly, she draws on everyday experience to challenge art institutions (moreover to challenge the art residency model, which proves hugely inaccessible to artists who are parents). When describing this project, she says:

Set firmly inside the traditionally “inhospitable” environment of a family home, it subverts the art-world’s romanticisation of the unattached (often male) artist, and frames motherhood as a valuable site, rather than an invisible labor, for exploration and artistic production.¹²

Moreover, Clayton created an extension of this project that she framed as a sharable, self-directed, open-source artist residency. This projects nurtures a potent creative space that can be (re)used by other practitioners. This also resonates with another initiative from the 1970s, the project *Feministo* that initially consisted of a personal exchange of small (and thus cheap and easy to post) artworks between friends Kate Walker and Sally Gallop. But what was originally a correspondence between friends, gradually became politicised and expanded to include more women of different ages

¹¹ Knight, Sarah. *Mierle Laderman Ukeles Maintenance Art Works 1969–1980 EXHIBITION GUIDE*. Bristol: Arnolfini. 2013.

¹² Clayton, Lenka. *An Artist Residency in Motherhood*. Available from: <http://www.artistresidencyin-motherhood.com/> (Accessed on 20 August 2016).

and backgrounds. Both *Feministo* and *An Artists Residency in Motherhood* offer open space for sharing and questioning of the domestic, frustration with the art world, and disabling prejudices about women's creativity. Both projects performatively address the domestic isolation and frustration experienced during motherhood and defy the notion of 'proper art' in their manifestos. In Kate Walker's playful manifesto, in response to her friends Catherine Nicholson's concerns about her practice as not being 'proper art', she states:

Art is like cooking. Art is like childbirth. Art is like breathing. Our art is ancient magic. Art is solidarity. Our artwork is together even when we are apart. Ours is ordinary + useful magic. We don't boast.¹³

Almost forty years later, Clayton voices in her manifesto a similar sentiment, after heavily criticizing the 'proper art' models:

I will undergo this self-imposed artist residency in order to fully experience and explore the fragmented focus, nap-length studio time, limited movement and resources and general upheaval that parenthood brings and allow it to shape the direction of my work, rather than try to work "despite" it.¹⁴

This intergenerational dialogue is important for young artists who are constantly seeking new ways of participating in civic discourse that exceeds the methods they are familiar with. This is certainly useful in shaping the range of what people think is possible and acceptable. One of the functions of heightened visibility of these performative activist practices is the legitimisation of this kind of work. As argued by Eleanor Roberts: 'the specificities of bodies remain crucial; we must resist a static,

¹³ Kokoli, Alexandra. Undoing "homeliness" in feminist art: *Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife* (1975–7) In: *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, vol. 13: Domestic Politics . 2004, pp. 75–83.

¹⁴ Clayton, Lenka. *An Artist Residency in Motherhood*. Available from: <http://www.artistresidencyin-motherhood.com/> (Accessed on 20 August 2016).

totalising, and generalising representation of a singular, mythical 'woman', and revel in the differences of our constantly changing forms'.¹⁵

Another mother is possible: Consciousness-raising across generations

Another common thread between recent performative artistic projects and projects from the '70s are that they embrace consciousness-raising as a primary means for feminist (and maternal) liberation. According to Campbell, a consciousness-raising group 'involves meetings of small, leaderless groups in which each person is encouraged to express her feelings and personal experiences. There is no sole leader [] or expert. All participate and lead; all are considered expert.'¹⁶ Current artistic consciousness-raising maternal projects share personal experiences within a more public space, to provide focus on personal and social injustice. Their intentions are clearly in dialogue with earlier art collective initiatives from the '70 and '80s, such as *Mother Art Project*, *Hackney Flashers* and *M.A.M.A.* Furthermore, these early projects allow current artists to take their everyday experiences and share them with other women, which leads to self-validation. The maternal, which has at its centre caregiving and responsibility, offers a unique space for feminist reflection. It is through creativity that women artists develop their feminist maternal identities and consider the potential for cultural change.

The project *The Mums and Babies Ensemble* is a collaboration between the artists Duška Radosavljević, Annie Rigby and Lena Šimić with their children Joakim, Nina and James. The project started from what the artists define as the 'lived need for counterstanding, creative expression, mutual inspiration and intellectual stimulation – the needs we recognise alongside our parental obligations, the needs that we feel on a more or less everyday basis.'¹⁷ *The Ensemble* project was created as an open space, one that can facilitate a community around a specific shared experience. Its organis-

¹⁵ Roberts, Eleanor. *Feminist Live Art: Why Bodies?* London: Live Art Development Agency. 2015.

¹⁶ Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron. In: *Readings on the Rhetoric of Social Protest, 2nd Edition*. State College: Strata Publishing Inc., 2006: pp. 172–184.

¹⁷ Radosavljević, Duška, Rigby, Annie and Šimić, Lena. *The Mums and Babies Ensemble: A Manual*. Liverpool: The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home. 2015.

ing principle was to bring a group of people together in a shared time and space, feeling, thinking, acting together. They used the principles of theatre and performance, however they are clear that it does not have to be just that. In *The Mums and Babies Ensemble A Manual* they say:

The space in which the Ensemble comes together does not even have to be a room. It can be a park. It can be a book, such as this one. It can be a Facebook group, it can be email, it can be Dropbox, it can be a Google-doc – all ways we have used in our work together. The most important thing is that it is there, we hold it together, it is warm and caring, it contains us and our babies. It is a space in which it feels safe to pass our baby to a stranger for a moment. And it is a space that we can pass on to others to make their own.¹⁸

The artists were in a conscious dialogue with *The Mother Art Project's* collaborative principles and their work that 'pinpointed the amazing lack of attention and respect accorded to mothers, their families, and the work they perform to maintain self and family.'¹⁹ Suzanne Siegel, one of the members, states on their website that: 'Although it seems strange today, at the beginning of the Women's Movement in the early seventies some feminists at the Woman's Building considered being both a serious artist and mother to be in conflict.'²⁰ This suggests an inherent need for artists to come together in order to share the embodied experience of maternal and to make it visible. As the members of *The Ensemble* state: 'We might be discovering new kinds of intimacy, new ways of dreaming, new sides to ourselves. But after a while some of us discover a longing to connect with other parents in similar situations.'²¹ They also relate their work to their predecessors and sections of their work like *The Babblings* are inspired by Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Maintenance Manifesto. The Manual*

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Liss, Andrea. *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. p. xv.

²⁰ Siegel, Suzanne The Mother Art Project. Available from: <https://motherart.org/about/> (Accessed on: 25 June 2016).

²¹ Radosavljević, Duška, Rigby, Annie and Šimić, Lena. *The Mums and Babies Ensemble: A Manual*. Liverpool: The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home. 2015.

instructs the potential participants to step on a baby step stool and explain that motherhood, with all its everyday chores, is in itself an artform. This provides a platform to talk about the invisible labour associated with care in a supportive environment. However, it also plugs into a year long discussion around the issues of the logistics of childcare and women's need to create art while caring. This aspect creates a clear lineage with Hackney's Flashers' exhibition *Who's Holding the Baby?* held at Centerprise Community Project in Hackney in 1978. With this exhibition, according to Rosemary Betterton 'new forms of maternal intimacy became visible in the context of socialist feminist debates about the social value of women's reproductive labour, in which reproduction was connected directly with particular forms of art practice'.²²

Moreover, these consciousness-raising practices seem more important today, when we encounter the brutal neo-liberal politics that profoundly challenge precarious maternal experience, especially in UK. I want to briefly mention here the Focus E15 mothers' campaign that started when, because of cuts, the tenants, the majority of whom were single mothers, were evicted from their hostel accommodation. In response they occupied houses on the council-owned Carpenter Estate, which was due to be demolished, with the land being sold off for development. Both the closure of the hostel and the proposed demolition of the estate resulted from a lack of political will to secure decent and genuinely affordable housing for the kinds of tenants who find themselves being classed as undesirable (unmarried, homeless, with children). Focus E15 uses their own stories and DIY art strategies to portray their battle with Newham council and expose/perform the everyday chores of single mothers for themselves and for the media. bell hooks has articulated an understanding of autobiography as an instrumental method for mapping political journeys²³. As a political subversion and a cultural protest tactic, the Focus E15 sit-in, organised with their children, enabled them as activists to become public opinion saboteurs of both the

²² Betterton, R., (2010). Maternal Embarrassment: Feminist Art and Maternal Affects. *Studies in the Maternal*. 2(1), pp. 1–18.

²³ hooks, bell. *Ain't I A Woman*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981.

corporate and government messages. Jasmine Stone from Focus E15 elucidates on the need for this protest to be engaging and accessible, almost performative.

One of the most important things is to make the Focus E15 campaign fun. People are happy, smiling and we are demonstrating and having a good time; we are a community, united together and really there for each other. We also make every event accessible for children, people with disabilities, etc. This is a movement we can build together and we need to make sure that everyone feels welcomed and that they can get involved. Also, because it began with the mothers in the hostel, it has always been very child-friendly – for example, we held a messy play demonstration and let the kids paint everywhere.²⁴

But also it is clear that Focus E15 want to use these artistic hospitality strategies to raise consciousness about the needs of the single mothers who occupy council properties. This responds to the thoughts of my conference co-organiser and dear friend Valerie Walkerdine, who claims that we need to ‘approach the affective relations of class performatively.’²⁵

Instead of conclusion

Reflecting upon the experiences revealed by artists I discussed earlier in this Introduction and that you will be able to read about even more in this Special Issue, I am struck by a couple of points. It is absolute imperative to keep critical intergenerational dialogue alive and to continue sharing and recording feminist art practices that deal with the maternal. We must ensure that the difficult, yet rewarding work of these artists remains a communal and political endeavour. I am especially grateful to the artists who paved the way for the current generation, and to the artists who are still willing to challenge and question the existing art institution models. In sharing their experiences during the *Motherhood and Creative practice: Maternal Structures*

²⁴ Stone, Jasmine. Social Housing, Not Social Cleansing: Focus E15 Campaign's Victories. Interview with Macready. 2015. Available from: <http://rs21.org.uk/2015/07/30/social-housing-not-social-cleansing-focus-e15-campaigns-victories/> (Accessed on 20 February 2016).

²⁵ Walkerdine, Valerie. *Coming to know*. Rhizomes 27, 2014.

in creative work, they were imagining new possibilities and collaborations. And to finish, rather poetically with Valerie Walkerdine's thought that:

Making imaginative leaps by performing, not in the sense that the exterior, performance of class, is all that there is, but covering a gap – where there once was silence let there be speech. Where there once were images of nothing (no culture), let there be performances.²⁶

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

²⁶ Ibid.

How to cite this article: Marchevska, E 2016 Performing Everyday Maternal Practice: Activist Structures in Creative Work. *Studies in the Maternal*, 8(2): 11, pp. 1–14, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/sim.235>

Published: 15 December 2016

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