

A photograph of a woman with short dark hair, shirtless, breastfeeding a baby. She has a large, intricate black tattoo on her left shoulder. The baby is lying on its side, nursing. The background is a red patterned wallpaper. The text 'The Maternal' is overlaid in white cursive script across the center of the image.

The Maternal

FEMINIST ART AND THE MATERNAL

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FEMINIST ART AND THE MATERNAL

Andrea Liss



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I dedicate this book to the memory
of my fierce and loving maternal grandmother,
Anna Friedman,
and to the oceanic joys in Miles's future

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Thinking (M)otherwise

NEW BODIES OF KNOWLEDGE

SHE STANDS IN FRONT of a projected image of a Renaissance Madonna. The sinuous line of the Mother Mary's flowing gown, her angelic gaze upon her infant son, and the undeniable calm and power of this maternal image make a deep impression on the class. The Mother Mary's splendid body superimposed upon hers, my student declares that she will never be a mother. The glow from the projector highlights the outline of her stout and resolutely poised body. Her thick reddish brown hair is cropped just below her ears. She wears blue jean overalls over a white, lacy top. A man's navy blue suit jacket fits tightly over her outfit. "Good girl" low-heeled beige pumps complete her hybrid design of mixed gender codes. She stands there rebellious yet on the verge of tears. As if the Mother Mary alone awaited her words, this young woman has dared to announce that she will never be a mother. She tells the class that she had to flee Mexico, where her American mother and Mexican stepfather live. The religious sect to which they belong forbids her to go to college. She was allowed to leave home only if she studied to become a grade school teacher. Studying feminism in the context of art history and the humanities, this brave young woman—a budding feminist—was truly undercover at California State University San Marcos, located forty-three miles north of the Mexican border.

Remembering this poignant and telling classroom episode, I am impressed by the passion of this young woman's innocent yet sophisticated knowledge. She made her point well, contrasting maternal power in the revered religious icon of the Mother Mary with her own contested bodily and psychic sense of the maternal. She highlighted through this strategy that both the Virgin Mary and her adamant without-child-young-woman-self have both been repressed, disdained, and perversely made the target of patriarchal love, hate, and fear. Her burgeoning feminism was played out through her refusal to be contained and defined according to motherhood and gender, her rejection of limited possibilities for women, and her awareness that the only choice allowed to her as a career was one that her mother and stepfather perversely infantilized (as if being a grade school teacher were not one of the most important jobs a woman or a man can hold).

This young woman's self-imposed taboo to "never be a mother," formulated through her resistance against the lie that women, especially mothers, are not or cannot be thinking, critical human beings, highlights in extreme terms the false either/or premise that seeks to exclude a woman from being a feminist and a mother. This very particular young woman's scenario, with its tender and powerful idiosyncrasies, is interestingly akin to more informed past and contemporary feminist struggles against cultural ideologies that continue to make the coalition of feminism and motherhood a taboo. I continue with a few more cultural narratives.

When I first began my writing project on feminist art and the maternal, I had a discussion with a male academic colleague about an essay I was writing on motherhood and contemporary visual art. He responded enthusiastically and suggested that there must be a great deal of work on this subject, adding, "I would think it would be natural." I was dumbfounded and angered by his well-intended but Neanderthal remark that was laden with dangerously naive sexist assumptions. I regained my balance a little later and wished I had responded, "What is natural is the repression."

Another incident of ignorance and assumption toward the reception of the concept of feminist motherhood yielded similar astonishment. A number of years ago I wanted to purchase the book *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*.¹ I was confident that I would find this important work at a liberal arts university bookstore that I often frequent. Its critical studies section is especially good, and the manager is very conscientious. The book was not on the shelves for critical studies, feminist studies, or women's studies. When I inquired whether this book had been

ordered, I received the manager's apologetic reply, "I thought it was too specialized."

I recount one more story, among the many I could relate, of speaking to a feminist colleague about my strategies for inviting into the classroom the facts, falsities, and experiences of being a feminist mother. "Don't you think that risks reifying essentialism?" was the insipid and underlying mother-fearing response she gave me. "No," I remember responding. "I am scheming on my 'mother' identity in order to bring out multiple, conflictive responses and encourage new ways of thinking." I would also like to have said that this strategy verges on provocative ways of acknowledging the psychic body of the mother, a sensual and sexed virgin space that must be conceived; that such conceptions help breach the obdurate walls of fear that have so vehemently separated women's political, theoretical, and intimate lives. Call it essentialism if you like, but realize that such name-calling risks its own stultification. I would rather use my body as a site of knowledge than rhetorically give it up. Thus my colleague's response is perhaps the most shocking to me because of her refusal as a feminist to acknowledge the dilemmas involved in formulating a burgeoning philosophy of lived feminist motherhood.

These accounts from the late 1990s and early 2000s offer testimony to the difficulties in the contemporary representation of feminist motherhood. Still blatant is a patriarchal representation of motherhood that is caught between an ever-present "natural" space, another based in an insipid invisibility where "too specific" really means "too personal," and one in which a feminist woman herself labels and thus devalues the status of motherhood. Such ingrained cultural perceptions beg the question as to whether representing and living feminist motherhood are a concerted reality or still a dream of the future. Despite the preceding examples, or in spite of them, feminist art, feminist thinking, and feminist scholarly reconsiderations of women's and mothers' material life experiences are in a promising state of reformulation. Earlier feminist activism from the 1960s highlighted the debilitating cultural stereotypes that positioned women below men through such binary oppositions as powerful/submissive, active/passive, rigorous/soft, and so many other false dichotomies. The figure of the father was the object of scrutiny within the field of feminist thinking that set out to displace the confines of patriarchy. The mother, however, remained a silent outcast for many feminists who strategically needed to distance themselves from all that was culturally coded as passive, weak, and irrational, sometimes repudiating their own mothers in the process. Feminists today no longer need

to accommodate themselves to divisive debates that create an either/or dichotomy between feminist and mother. Indeed, if the mother is no longer placed in opposition to feminism (that is, held in contempt of feminism), a redefined field of possibilities opens up to cultural theory, art history, art practice, and the lived material experiences of women for rethinking the representation of motherhood as more than a sign of codified femininity or as a muted allegory.

I refer to uneasy alliances between feminism and motherhood in order to highlight the uncertain place of the mother within early 1960s and 1970s mainstream feminism and its contemporary influx and expanded status. Indeed, "I told myself that I wanted to write a book on motherhood because it was a crucial, still relatively unexplored, area for feminist theory." These words could easily be my own, but Adrienne Rich wrote them in 1986 in the tenth-anniversary foreword to her groundbreaking book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.² More than twenty years have passed, a generation, since Rich understatedly targeted the lacuna of the mother within feminist theory. For mothers' sake, it is time for the maternal taboo to be unleashed. Indeed, as the stories I recounted demonstrate, the maternal from the mother's perspective has been stifled because motherhood is considered obvious and trivial from patriarchal and other supposedly more enlightened points of view. Paradoxically, yet in fact holding the same status, motherhood is too obvious in the sense of being too visible, too seen, and thus turned into the obscene. In either case, motherhood is looked upon and looked over as a problem that will not go away, as an embarrassment. An embarrassment is something that impedes, confuses, deranges, and complicates. Motherhood within early feminist struggles and still today interferes with retrograde myths of the avant-garde. Motherhood, especially feminist motherhood, confuses the normalized order of gender and power. Feminist motherhood deranges the supposed natural and historical progression of culture. Feminist motherhood complicates the dominant institutionalized idea of motherhood.

The painful relationships between feminist motherhood and the patriarchal concept of motherhood are precisely what are at issue here. The historical and cultural fear and hatred of the mother continue to conjure up notions of her omnipresence, her invisibility, or her inappropriateness while real mothers remain unacknowledged. Thus it is crucial to take into account that early feminists did not give up motherhood in a wholesale fashion but looked instead for ways to negotiate and refute polarized thinking that forbade the coexistence of feminism and motherhood. Even

when important repudiations of the institution of motherhood were taking place, feminists did not stop becoming mothers or cease caring for or about children. But these distinctions between the institution of motherhood and the reality of maternal work and passion were often difficult to live on a daily basis. Remember the heartbreak and lucidity in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* and the pain, irony, and humor in Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot*.³ Women made agonizing choices about whether to mother, or to accept the impossibility of mothering for political, sexual, bodily, or other reasons.

One crucial aspect of being a feminist in the 1960s and 1970s that is still vital today is for women to fulfill their own desires and potentials to the fullest extent possible and to reject patriarchal limitations. To be a feminist mother continues to mean temporarily losing one's soul connection to one's work and one's self in order to give love and care to the new other. For some feminist mothers, this also means allowing one's self to become completely absorbed by the mystery and inexplicable joy that the infant brings. Sometimes these desires merge: passion for one's baby or one's child(ren) opens up new perspectives and forms of being and living. Oftentimes the mother's desires collide with her artist self. What distinguishes the feminist mother from the patriarchal model of the mother—the institution of motherhood, as Adrienne Rich so aptly phrased it in her landmark book—is that the feminist mother struggles to break the yoke of centuries of expectation. She cannot carry the myth of the all-loving, all-forgiving, and all-sacrificing mother. She still loves, forgives, and sacrifices for her child(ren), but not at the expense of losing herself. It is not a matter of “balancing motherhood and work,” as the media culture likes to insidiously simplify matters, as if we are really living in a “postfeminist” world. It is the feminist mother's admission that ambiguity is often the norm, an ambiguity that constantly tears and heals between the mother self and her professional self, between the mother self and her sexual self, between the mother self and her own child self. Strategies of feminist motherhood in visual culture and in life set out to embarrass traditional maternal qualities such as caring, empathy, and sacrifice, to displace them so that they are no longer kept solely in the private realm, assigned to their “proper place.” This book argues for creative transformations of the maternal into a new erotics that breach the mutual exclusivities that have separated motherhood from personhood, professionalism, and self-knowledge. *Feminist Art and the Maternal* grants mothers the gift of what is normally taken for granted.

My project of thinking (m)otherwise and its desire to reenvision lived maternal experience are central to feminism and contemporary culture at their very foundations, whether a woman becomes a mother or not. Focusing on the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the maternal image engenders issues that are at the threshold of productive debates within social and cultural theory, contemporary art, and feminism. This book engages in a rethinking of crucial aspects of feminist discourse that have been sorely wounded in battles between poststructuralist distance from the female body and essentialist perspectives that assume all issues can be revealed through the raw presence of the body. Indeed, no body is more cruelly posed at the intersection of the visible and the invisible, the public and the intimate, than the maternal body. The taboos brought to bear on the matter of the mother continue because notions of motherhood and femininity are still laden with assumptions of naturalness and passivity. The issues are also repressed because of the uncertainties surrounding supposedly maternal qualities of care and sacrifice in a so-called postfeminist culture. For example, consider images of motherhood in the mass media—girlish women who are portrayed as competent but vulnerable breadwinners, even as professionals—fostered by a hyperconservative agenda that does not want femininity challenged while it only guardedly recognizes women's economic imperative to work and thrive outside the home. At stake in breaching the taboo of motherhood and giving birth to new provocations is recognizing that motherhood and women are passed over in the unacknowledged name of devalued labor, whether in procreation or in artistic activity. The question is how to strategically negotiate between engrained codes of maternity and embrace the complexities of lived motherhood. Indeed, the dilemma becomes how to speak of the difficulties and incomparable beauties of the maternal without having those variously inflected and complex experiences turned into clichés of what enduring motherhood is supposed to be. Negotiating this terrain is critical double labor. The taboo against representing motherhood again strikes deep because the real pleasures of caring for a new other and falling in love again differently are tyrannically conflated with essentialized, romanticized qualities projected as implacable and designed to keep us assigned to our "proper places." The truth is that we are constantly in motion, are never only in one place. We work against allowing "mother" to slip into a place of nostalgia for the norm. The mind and body of the mother are constantly in labor.

Feminist Art and the Maternal embraces the relationships between the

material realities of lived feminist motherhood and the stunning ways in which artist–mothers negotiate and translate their experiences into rich and complex bodies of work. Collectively, the artist–mothers I discuss here rethink and re-create images outside of the historical bodies of images that have silenced and deformed the maternal. This book conducts an in-depth investigation of contemporary feminist art that is not afraid to confront the dilemmas *and* the joyous possibilities of feminist motherhood in contemporary Western culture. Such a reconsideration entails looking anew at the values of intimacy and deep sentiment—real, passionate, and unguarded.

This book also offers new research on early, little-known artwork by well-known feminist artists as well as contemporary work by lesser-known artists. Furthermore, this study hopes to create dialogue among differing feminist perspectives and looks creatively at impasses in how motherhood has been and is perceived and pictured. *Feminist Art and the Maternal* opens up the taboo of picturing maternal histories by conducting several inquiries, including: How do feminist reenvisionings of the maternal body—theoretically conceived as well as formulated through material realities—help breach previous false mutual exclusivities such as mother/feminist, female/male, weak/powerful, or dependent/independent? How is contemporary thinking about feminism and motherhood in art and other forms of visual culture redefining ideas and practices of reciprocity and intersubjectivity—that is, the psychic spaces where the self and the other, and specifically in relation to the child and the mother, are simultaneously intertwined and separate?⁴ Thus, through such feminist conceptions of interdependence, intersubjectivity, and the maternal self, I consider how the artists conceive new social projects that think (m)otherwise. I pose these questions in affinity with philosopher Sara Ruddick’s foundational ideas on the concept of maternal thinking, specifically as she wondered “what maternal concepts might introduce into political and philosophical discussions.”⁵

Feminist Art and the Maternal is mindful of the dangerous splits in social thinking and cultural practice that have torn women’s bodies from their minds and created a taboo against thinking maternal bodies and minds. It is precisely in order to highlight these painful schisms that I employ the mending force of the interplay between theory and passion. This study thus redefines scholarly and autobiographical methodologies, intertwining crucial theoretical texts with strategic first-person voices (my own, my son’s, my students’, other scholars’, artist–mothers’, and those of their children).

My thinking on “voice” is in affinity with that of feminist law professor and writer Drucilla Cornell: “I use ‘voice’ in contrast to muteness that makes feminine ‘reality’ disappear because it cannot be articulated. Muteness not only implies silencing of women, it also indicates the ‘dumbness’ before what cannot be ‘heard’ or ‘read’ because it cannot be articulated.”⁶

The articulation of multiple feminist maternal voices is thus especially crucial within the histories of patriarchal dumbness that would not hear women’s complaints and melodies. Historically, mothers (i.e., the expected subset of women) have been spoken for. Their tongues have been tied. Feminist motherhood is a search for modes of speaking and being beyond a subjugated subjectivity. In other words, feminist motherhood is the formulation of the maternal from within the mother’s own subjectivity. This is a subjectivity, however, that is articulated from the mother’s always in-flux psychic and political space, as well as through her watchful maternal gaze. This subjectivity arises from and opens up to an intersubjectivity that starts with the mother–child relationship. Motherhood begs the question of intersubjectivity, love, and intimacy. The critical question is precisely how the mother–child coupling is posed. Traditionally, the perfect paradigm of the figure of ethics and alterity—that is, the giving of the self to the other—is the mother. She responds to the needs of the other over her own needs, knowing that the needs of the child are primary. Indeed, the mother’s lack of selfhood represents the singular exemplar of motherhood. The figure of the mother finds herself, *ad infinitum*, at the selfless center bearing the burden of singular responsibility and representation.⁷

Of course, this giving of sustenance and care, which does not have to be performed selflessly, is of the utmost importance for infants and children, who are not yet ready to take care of themselves. But this obvious necessity of care overwhelms the representation of all maternal acts, framing the mother as eternally sacrificing and self-giving. Rather than framing and enslaving the mother within skewed standards of ethics and morality that keep her in her “rightful” place, thinking the concept of intersubjectivity is a way of acknowledging multiple maternal spaces. Working with a feminist concept of intersubjectivity—how to emphatically be in the place of the other *and* inside one’s self, how to care for another *and* one’s self—allows me to challenge patriarchal ideas of dominance over mothers and others. Such patriarchal concepts have created harmful, fatal notions of human relationship and culture based on power, violence, elevation of the isolated self, and utter disrespect for others. Art and theory are sites for imagining new ways of being and beckoning previously unarticulated possibilities. The visual and theoretical representations of feminist motherhood that I work

with here renounce such patriarchal, sexist, and racist attitudes that separate the body from the mind, the intimate from the political, and human beings from each other. The concept of feminist motherhood in *Feminist Art and the Maternal* strategically revalues certain traditional characteristics of the maternal, such as nurturance, care, empathy, and passion and projects these supposedly “sentimental” maternal traits outside their previously limited range. Thus, they can be seen anew as loving and political acts. Reconceiving the maternal as new bodies of feminist knowledge offers revolutionary ways for rethinking human relationships and creating new forms of maternal culture.

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Breaching the Taboo

IN HER ESSAY “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth,” contemporary art critic and curator Lucy Lippard cogently questioned the absence of artwork by women that addressed images or experiences of motherhood.¹ Her questioning took place in relationship to production in the field of feminist art about women’s domestic work produced in the early 1970s in the United States. Developing feminist theories and experimental feminist visual art of the 1960s and 1970s sought to give women the right to articulate and represent their crucial experiences *as women*. Such articulations often utilized the realm of the domestic, sometimes through thoughtful and ironic strategies that refused the debasement of so-called women’s work. Despite refutations, explorations, and reevaluations of the domestic in feminist art practice, motherhood continued to be muted. Responding in part to Lippard’s important recognition of the cultural taboo placed on the maternal as a subject for contemporary art and the complex artistic and maternal reticence on the part of feminist mother–artists to address this cultural restriction, I explore in this chapter the dawning of crucial early feminist artwork that addressed the complexities of the domestic and the maternal from the mother’s perspective. Thus I open with a discussion of Mother Art, a collaborative group that Lippard mentioned in her prescient essay. Mother Art is a collective of artist–mothers who met through their

involvement in the Woman's Building in downtown Los Angeles in 1974. The original members were Christy Kruse, Helen Million, Suzanne Siegel, and Laura Silgali. Gloria Hajduk worked with Mother Art in the First by Mothers Show at the Woman's Building, and Velene Campbell Kessler joined the group for its on-site *Laundry Works* performances, which I discuss here. Deborah Krall joined later. She, Suzanne Siegel, and Laura Silagi currently constitute Mother Art. Members of the original group continued to work together through 1986 on issues of contemporary political and social relevance, including the war in El Salvador, homelessness among women, and the devastation on women's bodies from illegal abortions.

The original Mother Art group faced many of the cruel contradictions that mother-artists had to deal with during this time. One such situation explains why these artists were riveted to work together: the Woman's Building passed a rule that dogs, but not children, would be allowed into artists' studios! In pointed response, Mother Art built a play structure for children on the outdoor premises of the first Woman's Building. Other installations similarly pinpointed the amazing lack of attention and respect accorded to mothers, their families, and the work they perform to maintain self and family. Among the most conceptually rich of Mother Art's projects is its *Laundry Works* (1977), a series of site-specific performances in Laundromats throughout Los Angeles in which they hung their art and poetry on clotheslines and discussed with the women doing their laundry the work involved in domestic tasks—each miniperformance was timed to the wash-and-dry cycle. This project's clever timing and the well-considered site of the Laundromat emphasize the harried lives of mothers, especially poor mothers, as well as the lack of cultural space accorded to mother-workers and mothers working as artists. However, Mother Art's *Laundry Works*, which received a mere seven hundred dollars in funding from a California Arts Council grant, enjoyed the attention of ex-Governor Ronald Reagan. He used their project as an example of waste in government spending, reiterating this inaccurate description of *Laundry Works* in a 1978 article in the *Los Angeles Times*. Mother Art immediately responded by ironically performing women's traditional domestic work in front of banks across the city and at the entrance to City Hall. In *Mother Art Cleans Up the Banks* and *Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall*, the artists dusted and scrubbed these buildings, simultaneously creating commentary on real fiscal waste and articulating the powerful bonds between women's domestic and public spaces. Articulate, timely, and provocative, Mother Art considered the effects of its work, especially *Laundry Works*, on a deep social and psychic level: "It crossed class lines; there was something absolutely, wonderfully material about dealing with the sheer transforma-

tion of dirty clothes—wet, dry and the cycle, the literal revolution—and the metaphors are ripe for connections with social revolution, perhaps even something unimagined, perhaps utopian.”²

During the same time period on the East Coast, New York City artist Elaine Reichek was making serious and wry visual commentaries on the relationships between the maternal sphere and minimal art in order to comment on the male-dominated art world of the 1970s. In *Laura's Layette* (1975–76), Reichek placed side by side on two canvases a knitted baby sweater and complex architectonic diagrams. This work is from a series that includes everything her daughter wore home from the hospital. The sweater was among the baby clothes she received upon her daughter's birth. Six years later, Reichek put this piece of her daughter's layette right onto the canvas. Nothing was cut apart or reshaped. Set against the black background of the canvas, the intricately detailed and lovely sweater is insistent as a real object, implacable in its beingness. This object becomes surreal through its contrast with the enveloping darkness of its background. The sweater appears oddly miniature, yet in relation to the diagrams on its left it takes on an abstract, monumental quality. The diagrams become all the more stunning when the



Mother Art, *Laundry Works*, 1977. Courtesy of Mother Art.



Mother Art, *Laundry Works*, 1977. Courtesy of Mother Art.

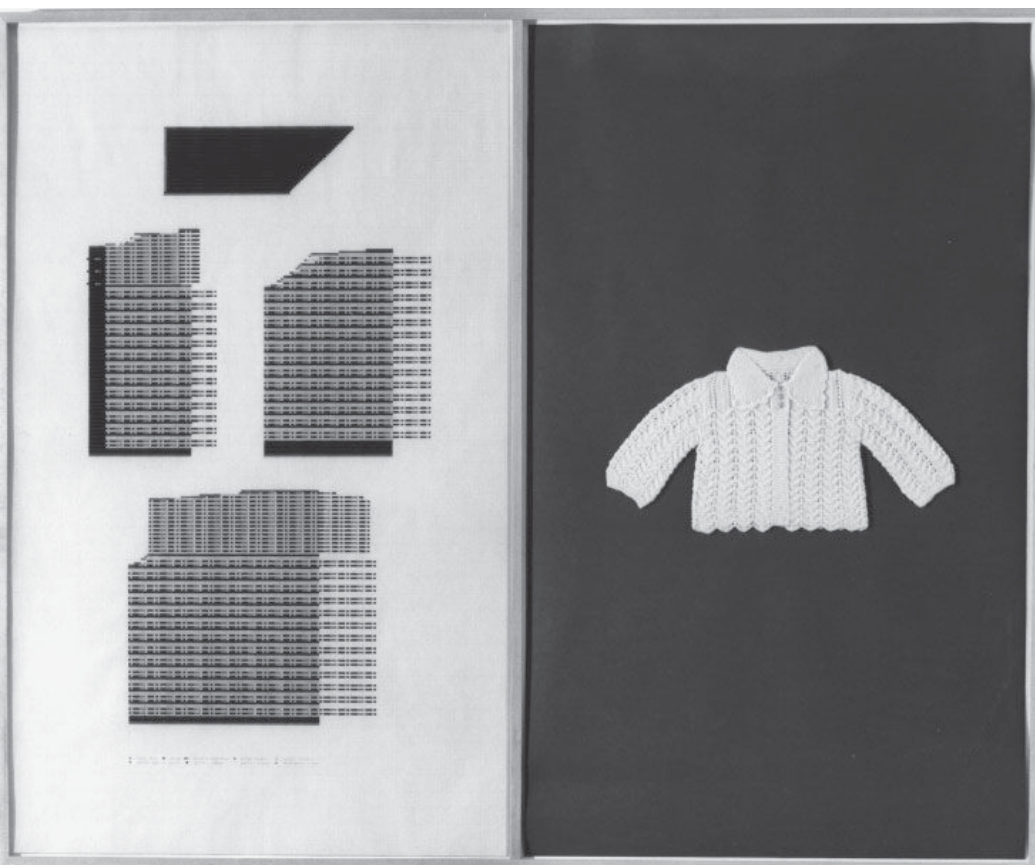


Mother Art, *Laundry Works*, 1977. Courtesy of Mother Art.

viewer realizes that he or she is actually looking at the visual directions that one would follow to knit the infant's sweater. If Reichek's black-and-white diptych appeared as such, with nothing on its surface but pure paint, it would represent the period's male-dominating style of minimal art. *Laura's Layette* refused the lofty and nonsituated aspects of such art, craftily refashioning absence with references to the highly skilled and time- and labor-intensive work performed by mothers.

This early work by Mother Art and Elaine Reichek marked a crucial cultural space in feminist thinking that initiated a break in the silence so long imposed on the maternal as a subject for art within the art world and within artist-mothers' life experiences. Within this historical context of early sightings of feminist artwork that broached the subject of the maternal—and pregnancy as a subset of the maternal—some of the work more distinctly addressed the complexities of the mother's subjectivity and intersubjective relationships between the mother-artist and her child.

Sherry Millner's video *Womb with a View* (1983; forty minutes), in collaboration with Ernest Larsen, is a riotously humorous, ironic, and ultimately serious take on the cultural politics of pregnancy.³ This video also considers



Elaine Reichek, *Laura's Layette*, 1979. Yarn and colored pencil on paper, with book, 52 x 62 inches. Photograph by Daniel Quat. Courtesy of the artist and the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery.

the mother's displacements and new self-definitions of subjectivity brought on by pregnancy. Millner was completing graduate work in the Visual Arts Department at the University of California–San Diego when she made *Womb with a View*. She experienced strong feelings of isolation at the onset of her pregnancy—no one she knew was also pregnant—which soon turned into fears of her body and mind becoming overtaken by the creature inside her. In the same breath, Millner speaks of the nausea that overcomes her and the lack of governmental economic support for low-income families. In *Womb with a View*, Miller's crucial autobiographical commentaries are not hers alone. Strategically merging her own experiences of pregnancy with sharp cultural analysis of the problematic cultural norm assigned to motherhood, Millner gives voice to the experiences of countless artist–mothers whose double identities culturally mark them as unfit citizens, thus unfit to be

mothers. Millner had previously worked with film, but the rawness and immediacy of video worked well with the deliberately self-conscious personal recounting and reconsidered narrative style in this video.

Towers of saltine crackers permeate the visual and aural field in *Womb with a View*. In “Chapter 1,” Millner’s hands are seen opening a box of these crackers and taking out one. The next scene is a close-up of frighteningly and meticulously arranged pillars of crackers. Sherry’s voice-over recounts, “I thought morning sickness meant you were sick in the morning. Nobody told me it lasted all day, every day. In fact, nobody had ever told me what to expect about being pregnant.”⁴ Her sense of shock that she is pregnant is played out through a simulated car crash. As Millner panics, her voice-over queries, “What if you became unexpectedly pregnant, and started worrying about being out of control of your life?” Yet Millner begins to acknowledge the reality of her pregnancy and her body-as-woman: “Being pregnant is so strange . . . so many physical changes. Hungry all of a sudden. Must eat. No ability to wait. Tired all at once. I feel ruled by my physical needs. Oppressive yet not oppressive. I go from exhausted to exhilarated.”

A slow zoom out from a close-up shot reveals Millner’s face, which is framed inside a drawing of a womb. *Womb with a View* is filled with such jolting images whose impact often acts as a backdrop to the utter seriousness of Millner’s analyses. A similar juxtaposition of humor and social commentary



Sherry Millner, film still from *Womb with a View*, 1983. Courtesy of the artist.

is at serious play in “Chapter 6: Savage Nomenclature,” in which Millner and Larsen conduct a lesson in naming the child. Larsen begins by writing on the blackboard “The Crises of Naming.” Undoubtedly a reference to Walter Benjamin’s reflections on the act of naming as a blessing and an act of violence, this segment of the video critiques the fetishization and commodification of contemporary birth giving in the United States by referring to the massive amounts of baby-naming books published at that time and the ludicrous gimmicks they employ to “help” the parents-to-be:

SHERRY [*voice-over*]

A favorite custom is naming children after the first object that one of the parents sees after birth. . . .

ERNIE [*sync*]

“Forceps” is not a bad name for a baby.

. . . or here’s a nice name for a little girl, “Placenta” . . .

. . .

Or how about a boy, kind of a western-sounding name, “Stirrups”?

. . .

SHERRY [*voice-over*]

Another method is telescoping from trends. This process simply involves taking the first letters of words to create a name. You might create a brotherhood telescope from the words peace, independence, equality, and truth, producing the name Piet. Or you might create the ecological telescope Tesa from the words trees, earth, streams, and air. Another possibility is to use the first letters from a favorite saying, book, or song title, and so forth.

. . .

ERNIE [*sync*]

Our idea was to use “Workers of the World Unite” and that would become “WOTWU.”

In “Chapter 7: The Agronomy of Desire; or, The Hatching of the Rough Beast,” such ironic strategy takes on a more somber tone:

SHERRY [*voice-over*]

August. The Agronomy of Desire . . .

Cut to Sherry sitting at a table filled with sliced melons and other fruits. Filling the background is an image of a baby dinosaur hatching from its egg. Sherry is slicing an orange.

. . .

ERNIE [*voice-over*]

Once, when I was very small, my family was driving south through mile after mile of orange orchards, in Florida. We were very poor then. At one point my dad suddenly pulled our old Mercury to the side of the road and we all piled out and grabbed all the ripe oranges we could from underneath the trees.

SHERRY [*sync*]

Peach.

Cut to Sherry cutting peach in half.

ERNIE [*voice-over*]

Maybe a bushel of oranges altogether. Those oranges—sweet, juicy, fragrant—were all we ate for two days. . . . Spitting the seeds out of the car window as we continued south.

Sherry cuts plum in half and then cuts grapes.

SHERRY [*sync*]

No pits.

. . .

SHERRY [*sync*]

Scoop out the seeds. All the insides have to come out.

SHERRY [*voice-over*]

It's occurred to me that I resemble a piece of fruit, ripening toward the future. The seed within feeds on me, almost like a parasite.

Sherry cuts cantaloupe in half, lifts it up, and scoops out the seeds with a spoon. They fall on the table, making a splattering sound.

SHERRY [*voice-over*]

. . . the soft interior tissues of my body, like the pulp of an orange, make up its entire world; its entire economy. But in order to bring the seed safely into the larger world, we need insurance, which we don't have.

Sherry pushes aside other fruit, and picks up the piece of watermelon, and starts to scoop out the seeds, becoming more and more aggressive.

. . . or money, of which we have too little, or Medi-Cal, for which we must apply to the state. In a simpler world, perhaps we could go to the medicine man—or more probably the midwife—bearing a large basket of fruits and vegetables.

SHERRY [voice-over]

The first question at the Medi-Cal office is: “Who is the father?” The second question is: “Who is the father?” It’s also the third and fourth questions. “Did you think you could apply on your own for your own medical care?” The Medi-Cal officer leans over the table towards me, his jaws tightening, his contempt slobbering onto his chin as he continues.

Wet, scooping sounds, like slobber. Sherry breaks off part of the watermelon in her hand, holds up the inside of the watermelon, and starts to scoop that out.

The state is interested in what it defines as the family unit. The more he sees me from the outside in, the more my body turns inside out.

Camera zooms into a close-up of watermelon, red and oozing; the inside of the fruit is heaped on the table; camera zooms to extreme close-up of spoon scraping the watermelon.

His clipboard is upside down, so I can’t see what he’s written. He hands me some papers: “Return with these forms completely filled out,” he says. As I stand my legs wobble. I’m too dizzy to protest. Outside the office I double over in pain, retching on the sidewalk.

Cut to a slow pan, in extreme close-up, of all the fruit on the table—looking dismembered. When camera gets to the watermelon, Sherry’s hand is playing in the pulp, mashing the “insides.”

SHERRY [voice-over]

My vomit is green in the California sunlight, like the color of money. If it was possible to vomit U.S. currency, I’d be leaning over the heads of Lincoln, Jackson, Washington, Hamilton, Franklin. . . .

In the last segment of *Womb with a View*, “Chapter 9: That Oceanic Feeling,” whose title makes an ironic nod to Freud’s characterization of pregnancy, Millner rides the ocean’s waves and lets her ready-to-give-birth body relax amidst her conflicting emotions. The sound of waves merges with the sound of a heartbeat as the rolling title states:

At 9:49 A.M. on October 5 a healthy girl-child with the right number of fingers and toes was born into the world. After careful consideration (3 days) her parents named her: Nadja Odette Riley Millner-Larsen (N.O.R.M.L.). And they lived happily ever after. The End.

The video’s mock fairy tale ending and its overall vignette or chapter structure ironically parallel a traditional storytelling format. Yet the ambiguities



Sherry Millner, film still from *Womb with a View*, 1983. Courtesy of the artist.

and displacements recounted by the mother- and father-to-be uneasily fit into a structure that feigns easy and final endings. The discontinuous structure of Millner's journals during the period of her pregnancy carries over into the discontinuous chapter structure of the tape. Commenting on the criticality of the autobiographical voice, Millner has said:

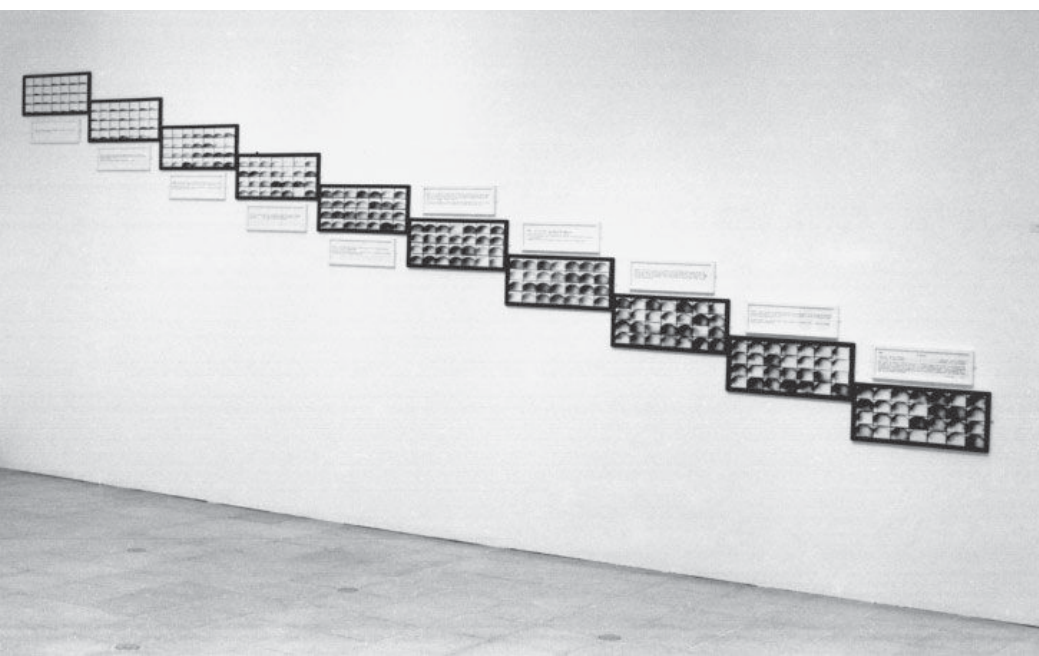
[I]t didn't interest me to depict just my own personal experience of pregnancy. Instead it became the anchor for exploring the social construction of pregnancy as an ideal state. And about the enforced domestication of women. And about cultural and biological determinations. . . . My personal emotional contradictions were in this sense a springboard for perhaps a distorting mirror for the social distortions my research uncovered. I was interested in a multiplication of points of view and attitudes that sometimes partially overlapped and that were sometimes even incompatible. The autobiographical self does not cohere: it splits off, circles back, tries another tack, attempts to change its gender, reimagines itself in as many extremities as I could manage.⁵

In *Womb with a View*, Millner used the autobiographical stance as a provisional and powerful strategy to critique the historical imprisonment of mothers as well as to give voice to the multivocal spaces of pregnancy.

Within my own experiences of pregnancy, I remember having a sonogram and seeing the wondrous image of my child forming within me. My sense of self was forever altered. The fecundity of sex, growth, and birth

was indelibly marked within me. Immediately after the sonogram and for months before giving birth, I felt enveloped in a dreamy yet lucid skin in which my sensual and perceptual awarenesses were heightened. Yet I felt oddly estranged from and in awe of the phenomenal physical changes going on inside me.

American artist Susan Hiller's pioneering photograph and text installation, *Ten Months*, produced in London in 1979, recalls some of the interweaving body and perceptual changes I felt during pregnancy. Hiller's provocative installation documented her observations of the bodily and psychic journeys she underwent during this fecund period. During pregnancy, Hiller took full-body photographs of herself every day and kept a journal, but she did not have any intention of turning these elements into an art piece. She was "just trying to keep a record of the internal and external changes of that period."⁶ After her son was born, Hiller decided to excerpt the photographs and use only the section showing her developing belly, what she referred to as "the section of the body you couldn't talk about, the pregnant part,"⁷ which accounts for the dramatic graininess of the images. Presented to ensure that the body would not be voyeuristically violated, her



Susan Hiller, *Ten Months*, 1977–79. Ten gelatin silver composite photographs and ten captions. Installed size 80 x 204 inches. Installation at Hayward Gallery, London, 1980. Copyright Susan Hiller. Installation photograph by Robin Klassnik. Courtesy of the Timothy Taylor Gallery, London.

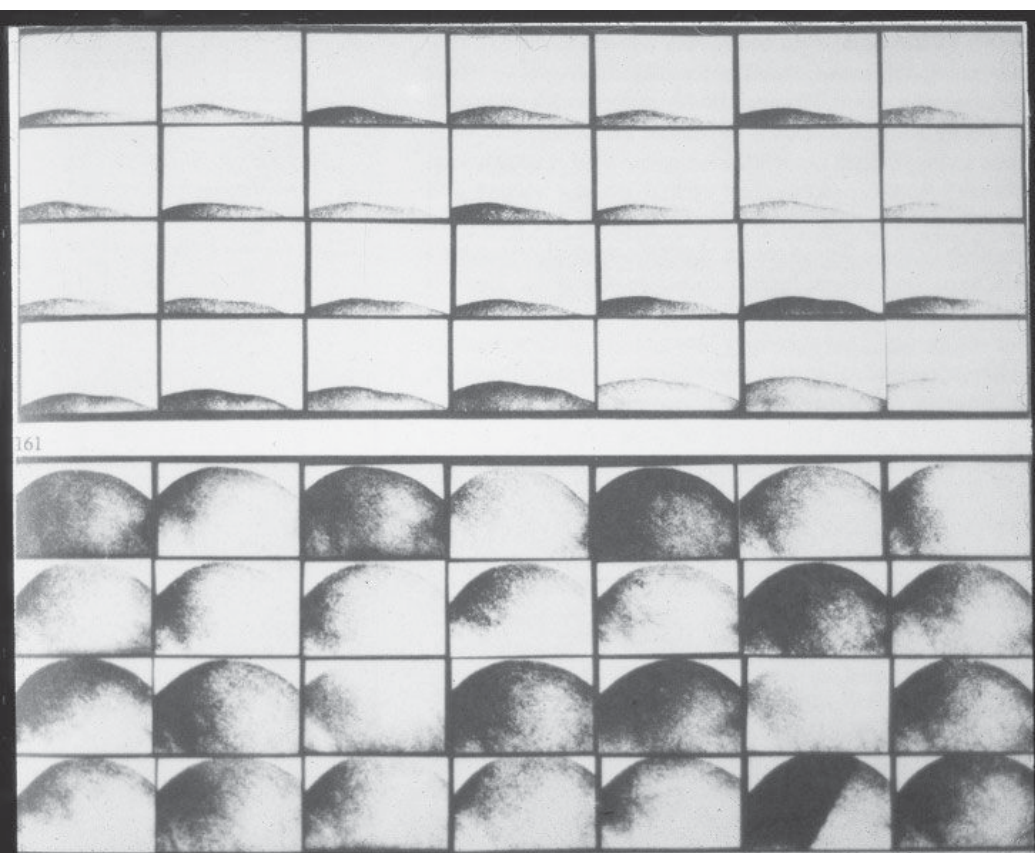
photographs distance the body from its owner in images that paradoxically convey the witnessing detail of medical photographs and an inviting sense of lovely eroticism.⁸ These images immediately suggest the moon in all of its subtle phases from new to crescent to half and, finally, to full. This reference is not coincidental, as pregnancy has long been charted in relationship to lunar time in which a month is roughly 28 days, the time it takes for the moon to go through its phases. An untroubled pregnancy thus usually takes about 280 days, or ten months. This is an observation that Hiller's project insists on with visual and textual cleverness and lucidity.

Indeed, the lunarlike abstraction of the mother's body created by the close-up photographs is barely legible as her developing, pregnant belly. This distancing strategy was part of a larger cultural strategy of the period in which it was absolutely necessary for feminist artists to avoid any imagery that would code their art, especially work that dealt with anything female—motherhood being the most debased—as “sentimental.”

Patriarchal discourse had schizophrenically coded pregnancy as that which should not and could not be seen; its obscenity would risk revealing the sexuality and passion that created the child. So the perennial insult of sentimentality masked true sentiment and deep feeling, which in contemporary terms deflects, insults, and embarrasses the passion that is erotic sentiment. To avoid falling into the patriarchal trap of false sentiment, including restrictive and false images of pregnancy created by men, women have either gone along with this hoax or declined to participate. Hiller's serious play on her pregnant body and women's historical bodies refused to hide the mother's sexuality and the obvious reality of pregnancy. In fact, some thirty years later, Hiller recalled: “I was told by someone important in the art world that with this work I separated myself by joining the feminists and that I ruined my career. But who cares? I had a substantial track record.”⁹

Thus Hiller cleverly represented this reality, this “sentimentality” of pregnancy, within the coded grids of the contact sheets that tempered the visual representation of the pregnant body. Deeply aware of the importance that her project appear, as she characterized it during our interview, “rigorous,” Hiller nonetheless allowed the abstracted photographs of her belly to appear, as she put it, “seductive,” a quality that they achieved in part through the infinite photographic gradations between black and white. Paradoxically, the charm and power of these photographs are that as the pregnant belly grows larger—the patriarchal object of disdain—it can hardly be contained within Hiller's photographic frames.

In addition to taking the photographs, Hiller also kept a journal while she was pregnant, “a huge plastic carrier bag full of scraps of paper,” out



Susan Hiller, *Ten Months*, 1977–79, detail. Copyright Susan Hiller. Installation photograph by Robin Klassnik. Courtesy of the Timothy Taylor Gallery, London.

of which she selected writings from each month that seemed particularly relevant.¹⁰ She structured the organization of the photographs and the texts so that the first image of a month linked up with the image of the previous month. This configuration avoided a strict formalist “conceptualist look,” as Hiller desired, and created a dynamic interplay between image and text.¹¹ Hiller placed the first five texts below the first five photographs because at that point in her pregnancy she was dwelling on her body’s physical changes. In the second half of the installation the order is reversed, a structural organization that mirrored her emphasis on her fluctuating status as observer and participant in a process she increasingly researched and theorized in order to understand what she was going through.¹² The complete texts are as follows:

ONE/She dreams of paws, and of “carrying” a cat while others carry babies.

Later, all the cats pay homage.

TWO/She must have wanted this, this predicament, these contradictions. She believes physical conception must be “enabled” by will or desire, like any other creative act.

THREE/She will bring forth in time. Their “we” will be extended, her “I” will be altered, enlarged or annihilated. This is the terror hidden in bliss—she keeps on describing bodily states, as though that will help her incorporate the changes within her notion of “self.”

FOUR/She writes: One is born into time. And in time, introduced to language . . .

Or rather—One is born. And through language, introduced to time . . .

Perhaps even—One is born, in time, through language.

FIVE/She now understands that it is perfectly possible to forget who one has been and what one has accomplished. Continuing the piece requires great effort. It is her voice, her body. It is painful being inside and outside simultaneously.

SIX/She speaks (as a woman) about everything, although they wish her to speak only about women’s things. They like her to speak about everything only if she does not speak “as a woman,” only if she will agree in advance to play the artist’s role as neutral (neuter) observer. She does not speak (as a woman) about anything, although they want her to. There is nothing she can speak of “as a woman.” As a woman, she cannot speak.

SEVEN/Knots and knows. Some NOT’s & NO’s about art—

1. The subject matter of a work is not its content.
2. A work’s meaning is not necessarily the same as the “intention” or “purpose” of the artist.
3. There is no distinction between “reading” images and reading texts.

EIGHT/She is the content of a mania she can observe. The object of the exercise, she must remain its subject, chaotic and tormented. (“Tormented” is not too strong a word, she decides later.) She knows she will never finish in time. And meanwhile, the photographs, like someone else’s glance, gain significance through perseverance.

NINE/It is easier to describe thoughts than feelings. It is easier to describe despair than joy. For these reasons, the writing gives a false impression: there is not enough exultation in it. At that point, she writes: time is no longer a hindrance, but a means of making actual what is potential.

TEN/“Seeing” (& depicting) . . . Natural “fact” (photos) “feeling” (& describing) . . . cultural artifact (text). She needs to resolve these feelings of stress caused by having internalised two or more ways of knowing, believing, and understanding practically everything. She affirms her discovery of a way out through “truth telling,” acknowledging contradictions, expressing inconsistencies, double-talk, ambiguity. She writes that she is no longer confused.”

These intriguing texts reveal Hiller's thinking-woman self reflecting on her own subjectivity at the very moment when a new being was on the verge of changing her sense of self. "A trip to hell and a trip to heaven and the death of the self for a new self" are ways that Hiller described the extremes of feeling that are expressed in the texts.¹³ In *Ten Months*, she refused the place of the distant and assumed nonbiased witness. Her self-observations came from the place of her own thinking and bodily experiences as an artist–mother-to-be. Previously trained as an anthropologist, Hiller left that profession to become an artist for several crucial reasons.¹⁴ Among those that most deeply relate to this prescient work, social and cultural anthropology was constructed as a discipline whose research was supposedly value-free and objective. Consequently, male and female anthropologists go into other cultures, as Hiller described it, "to gather information, but they have traditionally gathered information only from the male speakers of the tribe . . . so the information about women that is being filtered back into the social sciences tends to reinforce all the usual patriarchal views of women."¹⁵

The relation of self to other/self in *Ten Months* stands in sharp contrast to what Hiller referred to as anthropology's "schizoid notion of the participant observer," a feigned position that assumes the observer is a participant of the culture in question.¹⁶ The anthropologist's temporary illusion of connectedness belies the much deeper cultural schism between self and other, a relationship that parallels the historical myth that "both practically and theoretically divides the body who bears the child from the artist who acts and observes."¹⁷ Hiller's project was and still is so provocative not only because it addressed pregnancy, the metaphorical bastard of the already taboo subject of motherhood, but also because it addressed pregnancy from the artist–mother's intellect and sexed subjectivity. The provocative strategies that underlie Hiller's texts and images in *Ten Months* are in beautiful affinity with philosopher Rosi Braidotti's ideas on subjectivity, the sexed subject, and bodily knowledge:

The "body in question" is the threshold of subjectivity; as such it is neither the sum of its organs—a fixed biological essence—nor the result of social conditioning—a historical entity. The "body" is rather to be thought of as the point of intersection, as the interface between the biological and the social, that is to say between the socio-political field of the microphysics of power and the subjective dimension.¹⁸

Hiller's project filled the mother's subjective dimension with a rich and rightful voice. This multivalent project also crucially opened up the intersubjective realm of self to self and self to imagined child/other. *Ten Months* remains a revolutionary work that was one of the very few art pieces from

the 1970s that addressed the risky subject of pregnancy when art production dealing with motherhood itself was less than abundant. Speaking powerfully and poetically from that unexplored realm, Hiller theorized a new cultural space for the maternal.

Feminist theorist Laura Mulvey and filmmaker Peter Wollen's film, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, made in London in 1977 (ninety-five minutes), also considers the maternal as a thinking, creative space in which the mother reconfigures the historically limited range of her prescribed cultural and psychic worlds. This work was conceived within feminist debates about rethinking the dominating phallic male gaze and the related formation and power of language. Mulvey theorized this concept of the phallic gaze in relationship to film, in which the projection and merging of the assumed male spectator's psyche with the film's male protagonist works as a form of power over the assumed female other through his gaze.¹⁹ In *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Mulvey and Wollen create an altogether different project for the mother within the organizing system of the gaze.

The film opens with a view of pages being turned from a book titled *Mythes de la Femme*, or *Myths of Woman*. This opening scene ends on the image of "la Sphinx moderne" showing a woman's face atop the sphinx's body. This striking and unfamiliar female image of the sphinx is followed by close-up shots of the male-coded Egyptian sphinx. The camera focuses on the voids and contours of the creature's sculpted face. The camera then moves out from the face to a vast desert landscape. This opening section first places woman-as-sphinx in a landscape filled with mystery, perhaps suggesting that she is in control of the myth, thus has a hold on history and its repetitions. The film moves between scenes of constructed historical myths, narration, and reading by Mulvey on historical gender and other discriminations against women, fluid images of a mother in her work space and her domestic world, and other sublime, abstract images.

One of the earliest scenes shows the mother, Louise, feeding her young daughter, Anna. Emphasis is placed on the closeness and touching of their skin and on the sumptuous material details of objects in the kitchen—an arabesque-patterned towel, blue and white striped dishes, and lapis-colored bowls. The camera moves from the kitchen to Anna's bedroom. In both scenes the camera moves at a slow, dreamy, yet attentive pace, allowing the viewer's gaze to work simultaneously with the mother's, witnessing anew her daughter and the feelings and textures of her domestic space. We also see Louise and Anna outside the home: Louise at work as a phone operator at a switchboard and Anna at day care. Louise converses with other women workers, especially her friend Maxine, about their working conditions and

the possibility of having child care on the worksite. Visible in the background of their break room is a poster depicting dunes within a desert scene, an image reminiscent of the film's opening desert scene with the woman-as-sphinx suggesting power and change from previous authority. In one of the following scenes, Louise's ex-husband asks them to watch a film he is editing. Artist, writer, and theorist Mary Kelly appears in the film reading from her journal about problems she is having regarding her son going to day care. She is wearing a dark shirt with lighter crescent shapes, the same shirt she wore in the sole photograph of herself and her son in the book that documents her own maternal project, *Post-Partum Project* (1973–79).

At that time Kelly was in the midst of producing her groundbreaking project, whose concerns about the formation of a maternal space in language and culture dovetail with those being explored by Mulvey and Wollen. These crucial discourses centered on how social issues coexist with the psychic space of the maternal in *Riddles of the Sphinx*. In a following scene, the mothers (Louise and Maxine) talk about fairy tales, their dreams, and their



Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977. Film still courtesy of the British Film Institute.

own mothers as they lounge in interiors decorated with gorgeous beads and jewels. The visual text that follows this sensuous sequence ends with the idea of the “power of a different language.” With this possibility in mind, the next scene opens to a pan of an archaeological museum—a deeply gendered and historically coded space—whose walls are oddly brilliant with a deep orange-red color. The museum room is filled with ancient Egyptian tomb figures and other artifacts. Louise and Anna walk by the figures and chests that seem to hold mysterious treasures. Egyptian hieroglyphs appear on the screen as a female voice-over recounts in the third person a woman’s sense of freedom in finding her voice. The next scene makes a shift to the image of a female acrobat on a stage wearing orange, red, and green clothing. These colors change in a psychedelic manner to the sound of drumming music. The female acrobat–juggler’s fluid body is joyously absorbed by the vibrant, hypnotic colors.

These sumptuous aspects of *Riddles of the Sphinx* flow into some of French psychoanalyst and writer Julia Kristeva’s thinking on the maternal and its repression in language. As articulated in relation to Freudian



Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977. Film still courtesy of the British Film Institute.

psychoanalytic readings that have made mute the maternal, art historian Griselda Pollock queries:

How can we traverse the religion of the Word and its supporting pendant: the silent, decorporealized, hystericized Mother? Julia Kristeva suggests the way of the artist, whose oversaturation of sign systems compensates for the poverty of the signs themselves. Poetic or aesthetic discourse tentatively catches up links between the renunciation of the drives within the signifiers of the Symbolic and the pulsions and energies of the preverbal domain fantasmatically associated with the maternal instance. The poetic handles the necessary regulation associated with language which is the condition of non-psychotic subjectivity while also opening filters through to the affective domain of the underside of symbolic language, the semiotic, the residue of the drives, signaled in color and rhythm, perhaps in seriality and a delight in the exact texture of materials and the metaphoric quality of objects.²⁰

Kristeva's thinking opens up poetic spaces in which the maternal can be formulated as a difficult rebellion against its repression in the form of artistic and aesthetic experimentation. Crucial are the various forms of jubilation "signaled in color and rhythm . . . and a delight in the exact texture of materials and the metaphoric quality of objects." These delightful and joyous elements in *Riddles of the Sphinx* signal the construction of maternal forms of language that ironically parallel those branded by patriarchy as hysterical, nonsensical, and thus made mute.

This elegant experimental film also theorizes a deeply complex, open-ended, and multifaceted concept of the maternal. The mother's realities and difficulties in the social world—narrated by Kelly and articulated theoretically and historically by Mulvey and Wollen—merge beautifully with the possibilities the mother imagines for social change. The mother is an active thinker and organizer for child care, and she muses on her own dreams. Such modes of being are presented in the film as absolutely in harmony with each other. These multiple concepts of the mother—at once thinking, political, and sensuous—may seem obvious and unnecessary to articulate. Yet it is precisely these truths that patriarchy has kept as its dangerous secret, forever trying to suppress. Psychoanalyst and writer Luce Irigaray's provocative writing on the body of woman, *l'écriture féminine*, is especially inflected toward the body of mother and the patriarchal dominance under which it has suffered. She accords a special significance to the fluid and multiple aspects of the maternal body, not only a literal and physical body but also states of being that must be phrased and imagined:

Speculation whirls round faster and faster as it pierces, bores, drills into a volume that is supposed to be *solid* still.

. . . Whipped along spinning, twirling faster and faster until matter shatters into pieces crumble into dust. Or into the substance of language? The matrix discourse? The mother's "body"? . . . The/a woman never closes up into a volume. . . .

But the woman and the mother are not mirrored in the same fashion. A double specularization in and between her/them is already in place. And more. For the sex of woman is not one.²¹

Irigaray's speculative thoughts are in affinity with the polymorphous maternal spaces created by Mulvey and Wollen in their film. Most striking and emblematic in *Riddles of the Sphinx* are the camera's slow, sensuous, caressing, and often circular trajectories within the mother's domestic and social spaces. Such filmic choreographies project a different guiding system; the provisional formation of a maternal gaze. This complex and lovely film points toward another direction for feminist research on desirable representations of the maternal, suggesting that the issue is not solely that of reconfiguring a paradigmatic body that others see. *Riddles of the Sphinx* informs contemporary research, reminding us that the search is also about endowing the mother with the space to look from her perspectives, and in so doing to reimagine culture from another gaze.

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Intersubjectivities

MARY KELLY'S *POST-PARTUM DOCUMENT*

SURPRISINGLY, BEING A LOVER OF WORDS, I never paid much attention to what “postpartum” meant until immediately after I gave birth to my son. Then I heard the term too often in the clinical sense of “having given birth.” Now I find the mere mention of “postpartum” pleasurable in its solemn and wondrous connotations: a word that signals an entirely new state of being for the woman–mother and for the infant. Postpartum: after the birth, after the separation. I was left with a physical body that the caesarian delivery had made unfamiliar. I was also new to myself on a deeper level: another body, now physically separate from my still-estranged one, awaited me. An intact living being just beginning his psychic connections to mine and mine to his. The postpartum state does not mark the point of separation between mother and child. Indeed, it is the space that opens onto a new kind of connection between them. For me, the newness of this to-be-formed human being and the infinite possibilities of our relationship seemed monumental and intimate, fresh, full of wonder and fear. Thinking of the responsibilities that lay before me was overwhelming. Beginning to live them was an entirely new form of love, a love in which I often felt (and still feel) my own presence as ethereal, so in awe I was and am of this new person unfolding. I told myself that I would not allow my new mother–self or my child to be made into clichés. Yet the ultimate necessity

of caring for this new other hardly gave me time to think of breaking the molds, especially when my body had temporarily become bound to his most basic sustenance. How deeply dependent he was on my body and my love, a mutual love that over the years has become less bound to his physical needs and has ever so subtly and inextricably turned into my dependence on him, although not the life-sustaining kind. That would be too much of a burden. That is not his job. Our relationship is, indeed, interdependent. Yet naming it as such seems too fixed, too determined, too duly enmeshed. It is more undefined, open, part of the unconscious, like overlappings of the self with the intimate other where the mother's and the child's senses of being are constantly in flux. This more fluid and differently inflected sense of interdependence, this intersubjectivity, recognizes the possibilities for mutual acknowledgments and continuous unfolding of selves between the mother and the child. Thus, thinking the mother-child relationship as intersubjective, whether during the child's infancy or at any other "developmental" stage, gives this relationship a deeper meaning than more traditional connotations of "mother-child." It goes beyond the limiting cultural institutions of motherhood. Intersubjectivity crucially cuts across the traditional Freudian psychoanalytic concept of the mother as passive and refutes the mother's traditional role as mere backdrop against which the child, especially the boy, develops. Within intersubjectivity the mother moves more freely, neither all-dominating nor completely self-sacrificing. The concept of intersubjectivity not only gives the mother her own sense of agency, it also allows for infinite forms and textures of relationship between mother and child.

American artist, writer, and theorist Mary Kelly's groundbreaking text and object installation, *Post-Partum Document*, produced in London between 1973 and 1979 and published in book form in 1983, is a saga of intersubjectivity that powerfully established that the mother is anything but passive within the mother and infant/young child's relationship.¹ Yet *Post-Partum Document* works deeply and ironically within and outside the bounds/binds of psychoanalytic theory. Kelly's labor- and time-intensive project grants the mother an active thinking and writing space within the Lacanian scheme of the child's Imaginary. As theorist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan theorized the idea of the Imaginary, it is the space in which the infant lives in the maternal realm, before language, as opposed to the Symbolic, where the child accesses language and moves into the patriarchal world. It is with the Imaginary that Lacan conceived of the "mirror stage." In his essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," Lacan described the mirror stage as the obscure border between the fragmented self and its imagined double,

its *imago*.² On one level, Lacan's conception of the mirror stage is based on child development: that infants from about six to eighteen months find pleasure, comfort, and amusement (Lacan's translated wording is "jubilant assumption") in viewing their specular image. The emphasis on the young child gazing into a mirror or at the mother's body is a highly appropriate image, steeped as it is in relations between vision and the body. It highlights the complex and patrolled intersections between the private and the public, the biographical and the collective, the psychic and the political. Indeed, the body is the stage on which these mother-child divisions leave their traces. It is especially significant that Lacan placed such weight on the image of two bodies facing each other in an asymmetrical relation. That is, the body of the infant/child not yet in full control of its motor faculties and the false fullness of its reflected image, either in a mirror or in the body of another/mother.

Lacan handled the difficulty of conceiving both the processes and the effects of the reflected/projected image of the physical body onto the psychic body through thinking it in the following manner: "the mirror-image would seem to be the *threshold* of the visible world."³ Thus, the mirror stage is not simply the self's entrance into another, more stabilizing form, leaving the mother behind in the Imaginary for the child's accession to the realm of language. Nor is the transformation of the child into the Symbolic a clear-cut division. A threshold is decidedly that place always bridging the next stage of entry. It is also the sill of the door, its buffer between inside and outside. The term "threshold" also carries both a physiological and a psychological significance, being the point at which an effect begins to be produced. If the threshold that the mother signifies is not easily crossed, it may well remain as a coherent trace of the splintery cushioning of the once-unmarked self. Thus, if the mother's body is coded as the site of specularization and assurance for the child, the space of temporary intactness she holds for the child is also maintained through their mutual touching and caressing, and the surveying gazes are reciprocal. Indeed, that the Lacanian gaze has often been construed as solely male is not only one unfortunate misreading of Lacan but a giving up of a crucial place where the maternal can be reconfigured and differently insinuated.

The mother may serve as the mirror for the infant's uninterrupted sense of wholeness; in *Post-Partum Document*, she also reflects herself back to herself. Indeed, it is Kelly's serious and playful adherence to the Lacanian psychoanalytic scheme that creates the necessary oscillation between the theoretical and the everyday life in the mother-son relationship. *Post-Partum Document* began when the artist's son Kelly was an infant and concluded as he began

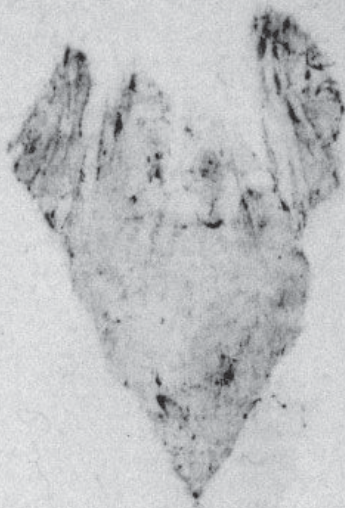
to develop language and enter school. Simultaneously, the mother–artist documents and creates memorials to their interdependent and ensuing intersubjective relationship through the creation of objects and texts that trace the remains and memories of particular phases in their parallel conceptual and psychic development. The seven sections of *Post-Partum Document*, the “Introduction” and “Documentations I–VI,” elegantly articulate questions about the traditional psychoanalytic and cultural formation of the subject, gender differentiation, and the feminine. *Post-Partum Document* is highly unusual in this nascent stage of artwork that reconceived the construction of the maternal, especially through Kelly’s strategic use of autobiographical writing. Such writing allows the mother the truth of her experiences, replete with her anxieties and uncertainties about her relation to motherhood, despite the risk this raises in relationship to the long misogynist history of labeling women who do not conform as unfit, ill, even hysterical. Her texts address the maternal with poignant and scandalous accuracy.

In “Document I: Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts” (1974), the pseudoscientific mother meticulously measures her infant’s intake of food and registers his excrement as marks of her accomplishment and mastery, if not relief. In their ethereal beauty, these spectral fecal traces on gossamer diaper liners signify the mother’s uncertainty about what is good for the baby once he is no longer nourished solely on her milk. These lovely markings also undermine the culturally imposed idea of the natural mother. Kelly’s anxiety is ironically emphasized by the texts that document the exact hour and minute of the infant’s particular intake. One text from “Document I” itemizes her son’s activity:

February 7, 1974

09. 45 hrs.	5½ ozs. sma, 4 tsps. cereal, 2 tsps. egg yolk
10. 30 hrs.	2 ozs. orange
13. 15 hrs.	4 ozs. sma, 5 tsps. carrot, 1 tsps. beef
15. 00 hrs.	2½ ozs. ribena
17. 00 hrs.	6½ ozs. sma, 2 tsps. cereal, 8 tsps. apple
20. 00 hrs.	1½ ozs. water
21. 30 hrs.	7 ozs. sma
TOTAL	29 ozs. liquids 23 tsps. solids

Each sheet indicates the baby’s precise age and is stamped with the date on the bottom left side. Kelly conducted these documentations each day over a three-month period.⁴ Notwithstanding the no-nonsense approach to the baby’s well-being in the cultural time and location in which Kelly made



FEBRUARY 28, 1974

06.30 HRS.	4 1/2 OZS. SMA, 2 TSPS. CEREAL, 3 TSPS. EGG YOLK
10.20 HRS.	2 OZS. ORANGE
12.30 HRS.	7 OZS. SMA, 4 TSPS. CARROT, 6 TSPS. BEEF
14.30 HRS.	3 OZS. ORANGE
17.30 HRS.	7 OZS. SMA, 3 TSPS. CEREAL, 12 TSPS. APRICOT
20.00 HRS.	2 1/2 OZS. RIBENA
21.00 HRS.	8 OZS. SMA
TOTAL:	34 OZS. LIQUIDS 30 TSPS. SOLIDS

28 FEB 1974

02

Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, "Documentation I: Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts," 1974. Perspex units, white card, diaper lining, plastic sheeting, and ink. One of seven units, each 14 x 11 inches. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario. Courtesy of the artist and the Rosamund Felsen Gallery.

Post-Partum Document, she cleverly turned baby care into a well-reasoned mania. Her precise notations also mark the mother's mourning the end of breast-feeding her son—just one of the many separations they will experience during this intense period that the project documents. The visual structure of these pseudoscientific documents compensates for this loss, giving a sense of authority to the maternal play at work in Kelly's art and fetish objects. In "Documentation I," as in all the other sections of *Post-Partum Document*, the mutual deployment of text and object is sparse, powerful, and sometimes stunning—stunning both in the sense of elegant and disarming. Indeed, more than any other section, these so-called dirty nappies shocked and alarmed the London public, including many in the contemporary art world. The bodily earthiness of maternal and infant reality was apparently too raw. Overlooked was the intensive work involved in maternal acts of care and love.

In "Documentation II: Analysed Utterances, Related Speech Events" (1975), the artist–mother conducts the work of the anthropologist and linguist. She carefully listens to and analyzes the pronunciation, cadence, and repetitions in her loved subject's developing speech. Kelly is also documenting the mother's hyperawareness of her son, in this case, his language formation, an awareness that creates a doubled sense of respect for the mother and the son. His speech activities are part of and beyond the everyday; as the title of this section proclaims, they are "events" in the child's and the mother's lives, events that are usually celebrated but rarely analyzed in such depth and focus by the mother. In psychoanalytic terms, language is the key site of differentiation from the mother. Thus Kelly's active and informed position vis-à-vis her son's language development sabotages the concept of the mother as a passive site. The mother's pleasure in documenting her son's early articulations and utterances and translating them into art are evident yet restrained in this section of the project. The formal sensibility of the typewritten notes and the bars of analyses above them keep the affective aspect at bay. Yet reading the texts, reading them aloud as writing demands, activates the viewer–participant's and the mother's enjoyment of the child's expressive, in-progress articulation of language.

In "Documentation III: Analysed Markings and Diary-perspective Schema" (1975), the mother writing her own narrative is now visible in tandem with her son's concentric markings and circles—the formation of language in his early drawings. These drawings made in nursery school were regulated by the institution, produced so that the mothers would receive a drawing almost every day. The diary writing was based on recorded conver-

sations between mother and son during this crucial moment of his entry into the process of socialization. Their conversations took place for three months, concluding with the mother and the son's mutual "adjustment" to school, as Kelly phrased it. These recordings are represented in three bars: on the left is the condensed transcription of the child's responses; the middle is a transcription of the mother's "inner speech" (Kelly's quotation marks) in relation to the former; and on the right is a secondary revision of the mother's reflections, handwritten rather than typed. Kelly's doubled perspective on her own observations creates a hypertext in which her analyses and discoveries converge with her son's colorful, passionate markings. As Kelly wrote, "In retrospect, these markings became the logical terrain on which to map out the signification of the maternal discourse."⁵ Kelly superimposed her texts onto her son's drawings, creating an unusually strong visual metaphor for mother-child intersubjectivity and maternal distance within that relationship.

The mother's narrative in "Documentation IV: Transitional Objects, Diary and Diagram" (1976) continues the story of separations occurring between Kelly and her son. Their mutual separation anxieties are played out in part through her own ambivalence about working outside the home, which is only possible because her child is no longer an infant. The inevitability of the son growing up creates the mother's triple bind: she conducts her own activities, is jubilant in their shared moments of joy, and mourns their inevitable distances. As Kelly discussed later, this section takes up "directly just how much the work itself—in representing the object—has ensured that the object remains lost. It's very melancholic at that point, not just fetishistic, but deeply melancholic."⁶ Kelly typed texts from her diary onto fragments of her son's comforter, an object that surpassed its use for the infant and became part of the mother's active mourning process. Kelly placed a diminutive and differently configured mold of a newborn's hand above each work in "Documentation IV." Although partially visible as objects, these molds work indexically as markers of presence and absence. The hands' ghostliness signals their presence-absence as witnesses to the mother's passion articulated in the texts:

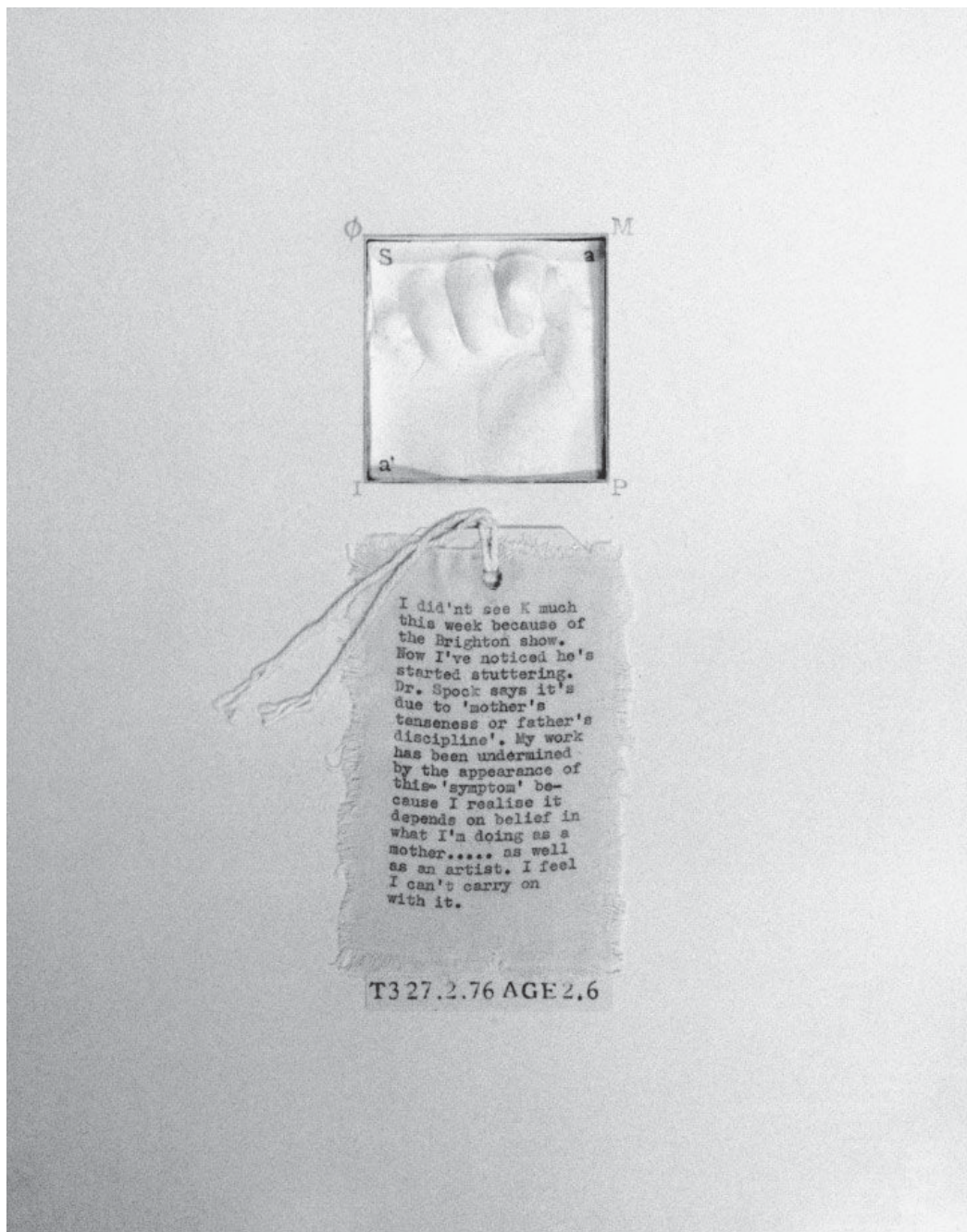
K's aggressiveness has resurfaced and made me feel anxious about going to work. I can't count the number of "small wounds" I've got as a result of his kicking, biting etc. . . . I'm not the only object of his wrath but I'm probably the source. Maybe I should stay at home . . . but we need the money.

One month later, when her son turned two years and seven months, Kelly wrote on another work from "Document IV":

I'm really enjoying my present relationship with K. going out to lunch, to the park, shopping together. He's fulfilling my fantasy image of a son as little companion-lover.

Post-Partum Document as a whole can be considered a strategic assault against the gamut of cultural restrictions put on the mother. In this particular excerpt, Kelly's honesty and passion threaten the patriarchal order. The mother as a sexual being is perversely out of place. The mother's even daring to express her fantasies is out of line. Expressing her love in this way toward her son is the final taboo. I wonder how many mothers or women who are the primary caretakers for a little boy or little girl have *not* felt this intimate joy, a joy that mimics but is altogether more innocent and dream-like than a relationship with a real lover?

Such luscious moments of the everyday erotic between mother and son that Kelly noted are few, if not rare, in cultural and artistic representations. Maternal expressions of the erotic as joy and wonder are only allowed so much play. The mother is figured as narcissistic, off balance, emotionally ill, or more if she does not adhere to preordained cultural limits. The film *Loverboy* plays out a relationship full of wonder between mother and son, a relationship meticulously designed by the mother.⁷ The film describes their shared love and sensuality through scenes in which, for example, they joyously and messily paint the boy's room and also through more culturally acceptable moments in which the mother reads her son bedtime stories or shares snippets of wisdom with him. These intense and exclusive moments within the everyday between mother and son, this space of their own, can only go so far. The mother is punished for their insular joy. She is—of course—figured as insane. If she cannot have her son to herself, no one will have him. She attempts to take both of their lives; in the film version, she kills herself but her son survives. To torture maternal desires in this way is one of the most hateful cultural strategies against mothers. Such narratives not only trivialize unrepresentable mother-child love, they also contort the unspoken issue of infanticide. Is it not possible for the mother to experience and articulate luscious moments of wonder and sensuality with her child, without having such feelings exaggerated and made perverse? In *Loverboy*, the mother does not allow the mother-son separation; she does not conform to the psychoanalytic scheme. I am not suggesting that mothers resist the patriarchal order or refuse recognition of difference between self and other in the way the mother did in this recent film. Yet there are states in between where the articulation of maternal desires can reign. In *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly suggests the depth and locus of this maternal terrain.



Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, "Documentation IV: Transitional Objects, Diary and Diagram," 1976. Perspex units, white card, body/hand imprint in clay, plaster of Paris, cotton fabric, and string. One of eight units, each 14 x 11 inches. Collection of the Zurich Museum. Courtesy of the artist and the Rosamund Felsen Gallery.

Painful cultural and psychoanalytic constructions of sexual difference and female reproduction figure prominently in “Documentation V: Classified Specimens, Proportional Diagrams, Statistical Tables, Research and Index” (1977). Each artwork is a triptych: the first section on the left elegantly exhibits objects from nature that Kelly’s son found in their garden and offered to her as gifts. These flowers—themselves natural sex organs—as well as insects, a snail, and other natural objects of the child’s delight stand in for his curiosity about the mother’s body. Each specimen is accompanied by a label that mimes nineteenth-century natural history museum labels and gives its scientific name, its “habitat,” and other details about its collection. The middle section figures a reproduction of the gift within a Lacanian diagram. Underneath each diagram are snippets of potent conversations between Kelly and her son that reveal his curiosity about the female/mother’s body and coincide with his offering to the mother. The third section reproduces medical drawings of the woman’s reproductive body within a Lacanian diagram. Below this figure are words from medical vocabulary that coldly define the female reproductive system. Kelly has meticulously arranged these words in alphabetical indexes, an arrangement that subtly reveals how the body of woman/mother has been historically objectified and distanced from itself. The repetition of historical trauma for women contained in these words is reiterated in her son’s innocent yet culturally laden questions, “Where is your willy?” and “Do you have a hole in your tummy?” Kelly answers her son’s questions with patience, as an active agent; yet her responses are interlaced with frustration. This is a deep frustration, a wound born from historical and psychoanalytic repression of the mother’s body. Kelly’s son’s questions are uncannily and tragically coded to the Freudian scheme of things, especially Freud’s dreams of plenitude, in which the mother attains power and fullness—her phallic self—only during pregnancy. She loses this status of privilege after pregnancy, crucially in the postpartum state.

This is a story of repetition for the girl. The boy fares better. The mother is further insulted through the process by which her children gain accession to “proper” or “normal” sexual coding. The young boy is traumatized by the difference between his and his mother’s genitals; her gaping “hole,” as Kelly’s son phrased it (we are inclined to write this abyss as a whole), signals primordial lack. He can claim what he has as distinct from hers and find clear-cut identification with the father. According to this psychoanalytic scheme, the daughter’s sense of identification is more marred, less distinct (we would write it as infused with oscillation, open-ended). Because the sign of “mature” sexual development in psychoanalytic terms is separation, the girl too must take her leave of the mother. But imagine her dilemma: she

has what the mother has but must denounce it. This disavowal must not be too strong lest the young girl lose all identification with the mother and try to accede toward male identity. She must not cast off the memory of her own tainted incompleteness, for it is her legacy to pass it on. The girl then becomes a mother and must undergo a triple debasement—her daughter's repudiation.

So for the mother, Freud's deaccessioning of the feminine is a multiple site of violation. If woman is bodiless and the daughter is always the indistinct shadow of her mother, the mother (once a daughter) bears the impossible burden of being both the figure of invisibility and the embodiment of vulnerability, of exposed body. So the asymmetrical relation of mother to women/woman becomes even more acute. Between woman (the projection) and women (the deceitful ones who don't match up, who always inscribe their multiple selves onto the scene), there is forceful play. Ironically, "mother" has not been accorded an oscillating, dereferential term that acknowledges there is a real mother and that there are both grave and joyful differences between tyrannical expectations and lived experience. "(M)other" thus conflates the uneasy absence/presence of the mother's body in the nonspace between palpable body and its impossible representation.

As Kelly reflected:

And the child's question, formulated as the algorithm "What am I?" also asked what it meant to be identified with a hole in my tummy. What does this do to the fantasy of having the phallus and maternal repletion? Am I going to be relegated to this secondary place once again, no longer the phallic mother? What am I?⁸

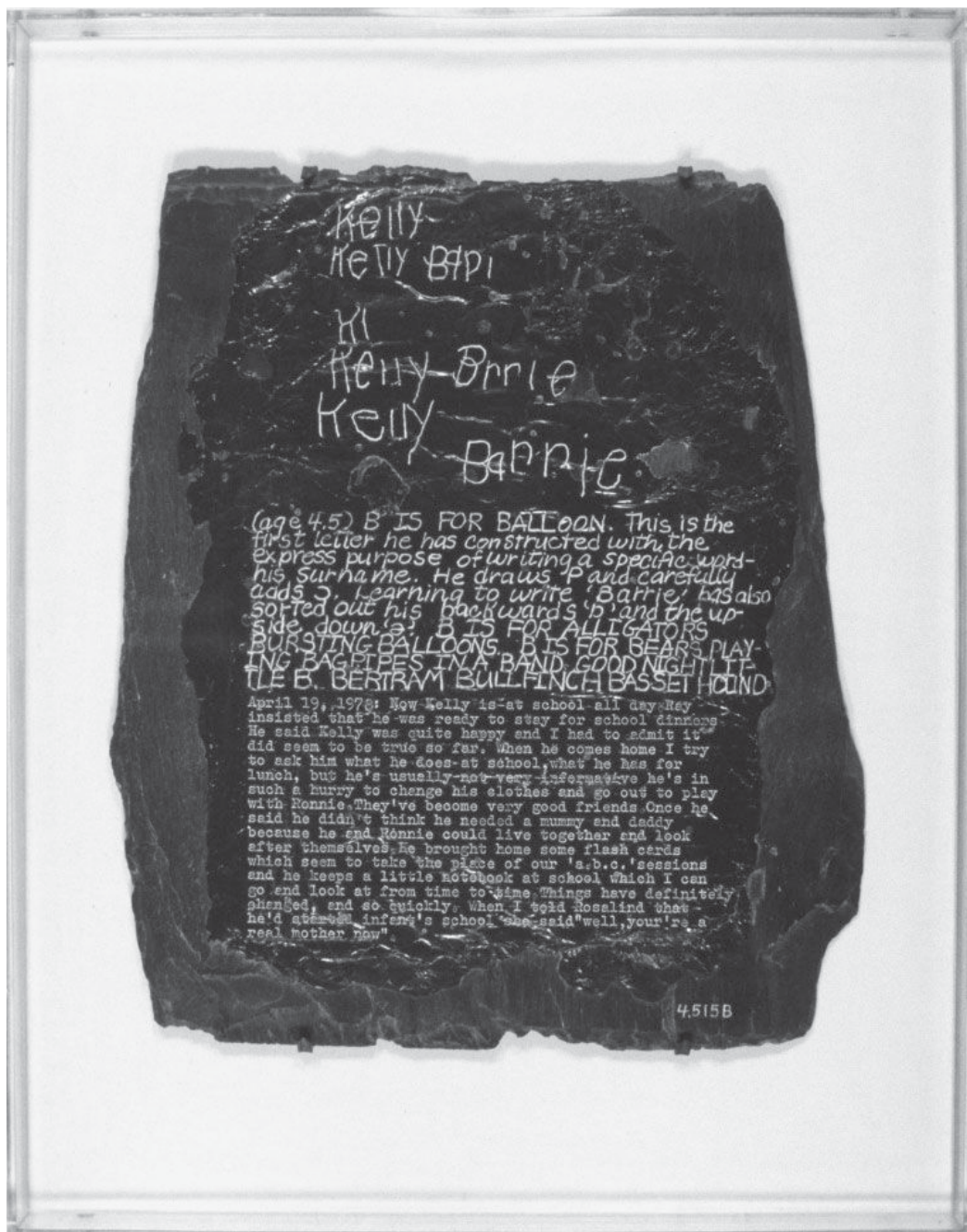
"Mommy," my son Miles said to me the way he does, inflecting this laden term with a healthy mix of wonder, curiosity, and skepticism (my projections?). "Mommy, pee like me. Stand up and do it." Holding back my laughter, I tried not to say I "can't" but that I do it another way. He insisted. "No, do it like me." When I couldn't stall him any longer, he broke out in a scream and a torrent of tears such as I had never seen before. Then came the dreaded "I hate you." A few seconds later, calm. He embraces me to comfort him. "Mommy, I love you."

The narrative of the mother-son separation continues in "Documentation VI: Pre-writing Alphabet, Exergue and Diary" (1978), yet on a less traumatic register than in "Documentation V." The mother-artist as archaeologist engages in the (mostly) joyous observation of her loved subject's acquisition of writing. Aesthetically and conceptually, Kelly set out to parody the Rosetta stone. Indeed, her "tablets" bear a playful and solemn

resemblance to that jewel of Egyptian archaeology, yet they also refer to the mother's discovered histories. The Rosetta stone has three registers of writing—hieroglyphics, Demotic or the simplified form of the hieroglyphics, and Greek—which Kelly replayed with her son's experimentation with writing letters and words, her handwritten comments on his development, and typewritten excerpts from her diary. Kelly's son, Kelly Barrie, inscribed his first name and his father's last name onto the "stone," reinforcing that this is the logical conclusion to the Freudian scheme of the registration of the "Name of the Father." Yet Kelly's son's first name keeps his mother's last name alive. Kelly's faux tablets not only mime the Rosetta stone, they also suggest the declaration of death and the overlapping of mourning and naming as in tombstone inscriptions. With such associations, her homemade tablets question the permanence and patriarchy embedded in language and naming. These hierarchies are tripped up, again, by the mother's active observations in her texts. She narrates anxiety about the poor state of her son's child-care facilities and relieved observations about his making friends and feeling some sense of independence. It is now the mother's voice, her "I," that is insistent. Freud's "Law of the Father," with the attendant loss of the mother—her lack and her disappearance in the Symbolic—is not the only ending. As Lacan theorized and Kelly magnificently inscribed, the mother-child (son) story is not as definitive as things might seem.

Post-Partum Document is the best-known art project from the 1970s among those works that approached the maternal as a crucial site for art making and cultural address. It received a great deal of serious critical attention and reflection, from its early exhibitions to more recent showings.⁹ Nonetheless, this project deeply challenged even some feminist notions of "proper" motherhood. Kelly's theoretical discourse was misunderstood as being cold and unemotional, and simultaneously condemned for being too excessive, especially in the display of her son's scatological traces. Often overlooked is how Kelly interwove profound humor and theoretical coda throughout this intimate and monumental project. As I suggested earlier in this discussion, Kelly's refusal of the Freudian notion of feminine loss after pregnancy and her re-articulations of the fetish object for the mother, as well as her serious and playful use of the Lacanian psychoanalytic scheme, create the necessary oscillation between the theoretical and everyday life in the mother-son relationship.

This strategy of playfully and ironically refuting, partially embracing, and simultaneously rethinking particular aspects of these schemas gave Kelly a deep space for creating enticing, multivalent artwork that differently



Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, "Documentation VI: Pre-writing Alphabet, Exergue and Diary," 1978. Perspex units, white card, resin, and slate. One of fifteen units, each 14 x 11 inches. Collection of the Arts Council of Great Britain. Courtesy of the artist and the Rosamund Felsen Gallery.

configured the maternal realm. The objects in “Introduction” to *Post-Partum Document* itself mark these overlapping registers. Kelly inscribed Lacanian subject–object diagrams onto four soft wool infant vests that her son had recently outgrown, transforming them into the mother’s fetish objects for her reimagining into art. The first vest is marked with a simple axis line, which becomes increasingly more complicated as it is delineated on the next three vests. The paramount concept represented by the word “intersubjectivity” appears over each axis. These delicate and strong wool vestments—emblems of the baby’s luscious and tender tangibility—bear witness to the complex psychic and bodily journeys the child and the mother will endure. Nonetheless, this somber introduction is not without ironic humor. These relatively simple Lacanian diagrams, elegant as they appear, take on a ludicrous seriousness in relation to the innocence borne by the infant’s vests. More complicated Lacanian diagrams appear at the end of each Documentation. Kelly referred to them some years later as “rather parodic algorithms” and further commented:

What I liked about the psychoanalytic references is how much it undercut that utopian hope of rationality, by attempting to diagram the utterly irrational processes of the unconscious. But what I *really* liked was what it represented to me visually, as a comment on these other diagrams and my own desire . . . I mean my own desire for a kind of mastery that mimes what the guys were doing. At the same time, it undercut their logic.¹⁰

Kelly’s comments that these algorithms and diagrams were “rather parodic” yet she used them for her own “mastery” are crucial reflections easier expressed now than at the time of making *Post-Partum Document*. As was the case with Susan Hiller’s *Ten Months*, and the stance of many feminist artists at that time who “dared” to address issues of maternal desire, it was absolutely crucial to maintain a serious, often pseudoscientific tone while simultaneously allowing the informed participant to read between the lines. In *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly’s stance was deeply invested yet tongue in cheek as it performed scientific, linguistic, and psychoanalytic discourses in support of a new maternal discourse. In contest with the perversely sanctified and simultaneously disparaged historical and cultural treatment of the maternal, artists’ work had to be hypercoded to withstand further metaphorical violence to the mother.

Kelly’s strategic employment of indexical rather than mimetic representation was deeply related to this necessity to shield the mother from further harm. This strategy was part of interconnected debates in British feminism in the early 1970s that focused on the uneasy status of representing women’s



Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, "Introduction," 1973. Perspex units, white card, wool vests, pencil, and ink. One of four units, each 14 x 11 inches. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario. Courtesy of the artist and the Rosamund Felsen Gallery.

bodies. In *Post-Partum Document*, Kelly was specifically concerned with the difficulty of the nonrepresentation of the mother in Freudian psychoanalytic theory as well as the risky possibility of her visual representation in contemporary art. Mimetic and illustrative representations of the mother verged on classifying and stultifying her visual image, as well as limiting the possibilities for her representation in social and political cultures. "So," I asked in an earlier writing, "what sense can we make of the startling photograph of Mary Kelly seated with her son on her lap, the unspoken image which serves as the book's frontispiece? . . . Is this image included here as Kelly's way of breaching the taboo against mimetic representation, even against her own grain?"¹¹ Perhaps the partial answer lies in Kelly's recent statement that this image was "always meant to parody the Michelangelo Tondo."¹²

Kelly's pleasure in parody as artist and mother is fluidly integrated into her use of the indexical objects, traces, layers, markings, and other forms of documentation in *Post-Partum Document*. Her precise attention to detail and use of indexes of information share important visual affinity as well as cultural strategy with work she was concurrently and collaboratively making. For example, the innovative film *Nightcleaners*, which began in 1970 and was completed in 1975, was insistent in its filming of the actual time and labor involved in the women's work, including close-up shots of one woman worker cleaning a toilet. The *Women and Work* project, made with Margaret Harrison and Kay Hunt, which began in 1973 and ended in 1975, used a similar visual form of documentation of activity and time that became reinforced in *Post-Partum Document*, specifically in the recording charts Kelly made of her infant son's food intake. These long-term projects were a crucial part of early 1970s artwork based in rethinking psychoanalytic studies of gender differentiation and Marxist feminist ideas about the sexual division of labor. This thinking offered possibilities for social change as well as utopian sites for rereading the repetition of the same. The overall visual impression given by *Post-Partum Document* exhibited in its entirety creates a metaphor for these concerns. The project mimes the serious sense of wonder and seriality evoked by displays in archaeology and natural history museums. Yet Kelly's insistent repetition of series of like objects, and the calm stasis they create, is disrupted by the engaged passion embedded in them. *Post-Partum Document* is a powerfully elegant play that implores the static state of events, a deadly serious theater directed by the mother's multivalent desires.

Kelly also produced another project while she was working on the early phases of *Post-Partum Document*. *Primapara, Bathing Series* (1974) is composed of a series of close-up, black-and-white photographs of her infant son's



Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, "Documentation VI: Pre-writing Alphabet, Exergue and Diary," installation detail. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1980. Collection of the Generali Foundation. Courtesy of the artist.

abstracted facial features.¹³ These intense and lovely images bring up the issue of mimetic and iconic representation in ways that parallel debates of the 1970s and 1980s about the depiction of the woman/mother's body in visual art. If mimetic representation overidentifies and simultaneously limits her visual and cultural image, mimetic representation of the infant falls into some of the same categorical problems. How to photograph an infant without universalizing what "infant" means culturally? How to avoid generalizing within the visual context of a singular and specific infant-person? What if such photographic clichés dealing with identity and the familiar were dispensed with altogether? Kelly's photographs have nothing to do with traditional iconic images of "baby." In fact, her photographic images come from the action of the mother gazing upon her infant as she performs the intimate and delicate maneuvers of bathing him. Hers is an active, mindful gaze related to the formation of a maternal gaze that Mulvey and Wollen suggested in *Riddles of the Sphinx*.

Kelly's dreamy and lucid abstracted images also remind me of passages



Mary Kelly, *Primapara*,
Bathing Series, 1974,
detail. Gelatin silver
print. Each image 3 x 4½
inches; three in an edition
of twelve. Collection of
the Generali Foundation.
Courtesy of the artist
and the Rosamund
Felsen Gallery.

from writer and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's meditations on the sensual details of her own infant son's body: "Gentleness of the sleeping face, contours of pinkish jade—forehead, eyebrows, nostrils, cheeks, parted features of the mouth, delicate . . . neither being nor unborn, neither present nor absent, but real, real inaccessible innocence, engaging weight and seraphic lightness."¹⁴ Kelly's provocative, surreal, and, to use Kristeva's precise word, "inaccessible" images are framed through the mother's perspective. The photographs in *Primapara, Bathing Series* give the viewer a sense of looking through a small enclosure to experience an explosion of visuality in parts. We thus take in the implied sensuality of the infant: his fresh scent, hypnotic cooing sounds, creamy skin, and indescribably soft hair.

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Maternal CARE

MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES'S MAINTENANCE ART

SILKY HAIR AS SOFT AS DUCK DOWN, no longer blond like his grandson's but richer. My father loved to comb his luscious silver hair after he took a long shower every weeknight, having worked all day as a plumber in other people's homes. He toiled in the intimate spaces that define people's daily domestic maintenance: their kitchens, bathrooms, and sewers. No customer was better than another, from the Hollywood movie stars whose agents took their time to pay to the elderly ladies who gave him pennies and home-baked goodies. My father was proud of his work; he rejoiced in keeping others' systems safe, healthy, and maintained. I admired my father, a man who labored with his hands and his heart. I felt delightfully different from the kids in my grammar school, most of whose fathers were white-collar workers. I especially felt that way on rainy days when he would drive me to school in his bright yellow, sparkling clean Econoline truck. During those rides he would often tell me, "Always tie the shoelaces together when you put your old shoes in the trash so that those who need them will have the pair. If it is raining, put them in a plastic bag and tie the bag tightly."

It is raining hard this afternoon as these memories of my father arise and I begin this chapter on performance and environmental artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. The affinities that exist for me between my late father,

Sidney Joseph Liss, and Ukeles do not surprise me; rather, I am stunned by them. I am struck by the deep interconnections between my father's many years of maintenance labor as a plumbing contractor, a practice that was underlined with a deep sense of humility and equality, and Ukeles's early and continuing artwork as it has developed over four decades. Based in New York City and Brooklyn, Ukeles is an artist whose work since the mid-1960s has been fundamentally about nurturing and maintaining natural and psychic life systems in all their detritus and actively acknowledging the undervalued labor of the people who keep those systems alive. Her working philosophies are subtly infused with Jewish beliefs that embrace concepts of healing the world, aspects of *tikkun olam* that Ukeles integrates into her environmental and performance work. She is well known nationally and internationally for her Maintenance Art activities with the New York City Department of Sanitation that began in the early 1970s and have continued through her position as the department's one and only "artist in residence."

Ukeles has also brought beauty, rebirth, and reconciliation to cities outside this country. *RE-SPECT* was a large-scale public performance that took place on the Rhône River and its quay by the town of Givors, France, on October 28, 1993. This performance, commissioned by Givors, is in the genre of what Ukeles calls a "ballet mécanique." In this work, she choreographed twenty-seven sanitation, park, and fire trucks; three barges; one hundred tons of crushed cobalt recycled glass; and one hundred schoolchildren in a majestic work designed to revive a community sense of pride for the town of Givors. The title *RE-SPECT* also indicates Ukeles's desire that the townspeople would communally reflect upon their civic relationships. She has also created thought-provoking public sculpture from waste materials in Asia and worked on land-reclamation projects from Tel Aviv to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Ukeles continues to collaborate with the New York City Department of Sanitation. She has been at work since the early 1990s conceptualizing potential art projects at Staten Island's Fresh Kills landfill, the world's largest dump site that had for years been winding down toward closure and rehabilitation. Tragically and ironically, this site became active and recognized after September 11, 2001, when thousands of tons of wreckage, all forms of life, death, and debris from the World Trade Center collapse, were deposited there.

In addition to these Maintenance Art projects directed toward respecting life systems and human labor, Ukeles's earliest work dealt with the life-sustaining maintenance work involved in mothering. This chapter gives background on some of Ukeles's Maintenance Art projects in order to



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *RE-SPECT*, performance work on the Quai de la Navigation and the Rhône River, Givors, France, October 28, 1993. Multipart choreographed procession through town and a four-movement ballet, including twenty-seven city sanitation, park, and fire trucks; three barges; one hundred tons of crushed cobalt glass; and one hundred schoolchildren. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

highlight how this work was intimately conceived through her lesser-known artwork dealing with gender, power, and the maternal. I will then focus on Ukeles's provocative performance artwork that articulated the importance of working from maternal perspectives and concepts.

Ukeles cleverly and appropriately named all of her work and performance events Maintenance Art. Her early artwork to the present is designed to make viewers and participants aware of the interdependence between our bodies and the organic and built systems that sustain our lives. In the event *I Make Maintenance Art 1 Hour Every Day* (September 16–October 20, 1976), Ukeles aligned her conceptual and collaborative sensibilities with three hundred maintenance workers who labored in the skyscraper where the galleries of the now-closed downtown Manhattan branch of the Whitney Museum were housed. By serendipity, Ukeles was reading an editorial about the poor financial state of New York City's Department of Sanitation

in which the writer sarcastically suggested that the department call its activities “art” and bail itself out by writing cultural grants to the city. Coyly seizing this opportunity, Ukeles immediately contacted the Department of Sanitation and suggested a collaboration. Perhaps sensing positive publicity from this possibility, the commissioner’s office responded enthusiastically to Ukeles’s idea: “How would you like to make art with 10,000 people?”¹ Ukeles then got to work on conceptualizing *I Make Maintenance Art 1 Hour Every Day* so that she could collaborate with the workers who performed tasks including floor washing, window cleaning, elevator repair, security, and more. She invited them to consider the work they did as art for one hour every day during the period of five weeks. Ukeles’s respect for and sense of solidarity with these workers, as well as her desire to create political connections between domestic and public work, are expressed in the letter she distributed to these maintenance workers:

Dear Friend Worker:

I want to invite you to join with me in creating a living Maintenance Art work. . . . Your supervisors have already O.K.ed it. It is part of an exhibition during this time at the Whitney Museum on the 2nd floor of the building called “ART ⇌ WORLD.”

I am a maintenance artist. My work is called Maintenance Art Works. I use my “artistic freedom” to call “maintenance”—the work that you do, and the work that I do—“art.” Part of the time I do private maintenance at home taking care of my family; and part of the time I do public maintenance in museums and galleries to show people my ideas. . . .

I want people to know about and to see the kinds of jobs you do. Because this whole huge building NEEDS your work. . . . It is your daily support work that keeps this whole building up just as much as the steel and marble and glass.

Your part is very easy. It will not take one minute of extra time or effort. You will not have to do anything different from the way you always do. Really, it will take place inside your head—in your imagination.

. . . Pick one hour each day . . . and think during that one hour that your same regular work is Art.²

The idea was not simply to elevate the workers’ tasks to the status of high art. Ukeles gave them a structure through which they could view their work as valuable and possibly collaborative in spirit with the work of artists. She was thus also conceptually suggesting that the artist’s job could be productive and sustaining to its culture. Emphasizing this point, Ukeles also exhibited photographs in the museum that she had taken showing the workers’ daily maintenance routines. As she wrote in her instruction letter, “So visitors

can get an idea—for their own imaginations—of how much human labor is going on around them every day and night.” Ukeles asked the maintenance workers to wear a button on their uniform that said “I make maintenance art 1 hour a day,” which identified them as collaborators in this art event. This piece also demonstrated the conceptual unity Ukeles was calling for between the private domestic labor women and mothers perform and the devalued work that hundreds of laborers perform in public. The appeal was to give a sense of humanness and worth to the nameless.

In *Touch Sanitation Performance* (June 1979–June 1980), a conceptual and long-term performance piece that involved all fifty-nine community districts in New York City, Ukeles went even deeper in her desire to create forms of empathy between the domestic “dirty work” done by women and the maligned jobs of sanitation workers. Ukeles spent a year following in the footsteps of the sanitation workers throughout New York City in order to gain a sense of their daily tasks and witness firsthand how their work experiences emotionally affected them.

It’s a portrait of a living structure. I’d been listening to what sanitation workers were saying, and it was the same thing other maintenance workers had been telling me. They’d say, “People think I’m part of the garbage.” People were in pain—it’s terrible to feel you’re invisible. And I thought, “I am *home*, man, I am home.”³

The long duration of *Touch Sanitation Performance* culminated in a deeply poignant and symbolic series of gestures. In *Handshake and Thanking Ritual*, Ukeles shook hands with every one of the city’s sanitation workers and said individually to them, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.”

Ukeles created profound political and psychic connections between her Maintenance Art projects based on the work performed by sanitation and other workers and her earlier and coexisting art dealing with the complex maintenance work involved in maternal labor. Her many public performances and long-term relations with workers in the New York City Department of Sanitation were designed to poetically coerce the public to face its deep disgust toward those people who deal with the trash and detritus of the everyday, creating a public bond between trash collectors and the domestic work performed by mothers. Ukeles’s deep desire to make these profound connections holds an uncanny association with Mary Kelly’s slightly earlier five-year project working on the film *Nightcleaners* (1970–75), in which Kelly meticulously investigated the work conducted by women who worked in office buildings, many of whom were mothers. In unknown affinity with Kelly, Ukeles’s crucial public art actions went beyond a sense of empathy for



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance*, performance work, New York City, all fifty-nine community districts, July 1979–80. A citywide facing of each of the 8,500 NYC Sanitation workers individually and saying to each, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.” Also includes *Roll Call*, *Handshake and Thanking Ritual*, and *Follow in Your Footsteps*. Photograph by Marcia Bricker. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

and solidarity with other laborers. She literally put herself in the place of the other. Working from a sense of deep intersubjectivity through bodily connections with the sanitation employees—shaking the hand of every single worker, following their steps in their daily labor—Ukeles has said that she “came through these experiences as a mother.”⁴ Indeed, in the highly symbolic *Handshake and Thanking Ritual* performance, Ukeles granted respect to the sanitation workers in affinity with her own and other mothers’ domestic work. Through a related philosophy, Ukeles’s embracing acknowledgment of New York City’s sanitation workers paralleled her caring for her own children—each deserves sustenance, love, and respect.

The relationship between Ukeles’s better-known Maintenance Art and her art on maternal labor—not childbirth, but the work after the children are born—is deeply embedded in her early experiences as a developing feminist woman and mother–artist. In fact, one of her earliest and best-known

performance artworks, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside, July 22, 1973*, an eight-hour performance at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, arose from Ukeles's written challenge for an institution to accept her offer to create a work of public and domestic Maintenance Art. She articulated this challenge in the text "Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969," which she sent to a few individuals and art institutions. Among its many provocations, this text also proposed an exhibition strategically named CARE in which Ukeles would carry out "service activities" such as cleaning and cooking:

The exhibition of Maintenance Art, "CARE," would zero in on Maintenance, exhibit it, and yield, by utter opposition, a clarity of issues. . . . I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls, (i.e., floor paintings, dust works, soap sculpture, wall paintings, etc.), cook, invite people to eat, clean up, put away, change light bulbs . . . my working will be the work.

Art writer Jack Burnham published the manifesto in the international, New York-based, high-end art magazine *Artforum* in its January 1971 issue. This exuberant, witty, and highly charged text caught the eye of the prescient art critic Lucy Lippard, who consequently invited Ukeles to participate in a traveling exhibition of women artists for which Ukeles conceived her first public work, the aforementioned *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside, July 22, 1973*. In this eight-hour piece—the duration of time mirroring the hours of a working day in the United States—Ukeles carried out some of the service activities she outlined in her manifesto. These performance actions included washing the museum's front steps and the floor of one of its galleries to convey to the visiting public the daily maintenance work that takes place in an art museum behind closed doors and after public hours. Performing these acts of maintenance as a woman and as an artist, Ukeles conceived of making deep connections between this work and the related invisible work of female domestic labor. Making visible the "dirty work" of maintenance and cleaning, she also took control of the guards' keys in performance actions that further alerted the visitors to the potential power held by the low-paid museum custodians and guards. Among these actions, in *The Keeping of the Keys: Maintenance as Security, July 20, 1973*, Ukeles temporarily closed various galleries, sometimes with visitors still inside. She had also considered presenting interviews with both museum visitors and museum workers about their perceptions of the underpaid yet essential work of all maintenance workers.

Ukeles's concerns for issues of class, gender, power, and control were born from her early, difficult experiences as a feminist mother and artist.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside*, July 22, 1973. Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *The Keeping of the Keys: Maintenance as Security*, July 20, 1973. Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Little known is that Ukeles's above-quoted original challenge to create Maintenance Art published in *Artforum* stemmed from one of her most painful experiences as a young female artist who was soon to become a mother. Ukeles was a student at Pratt Institute and attending a sculpture class at the time when her pregnancy was barely camouflaged beneath her work overalls. She had every intention of completing her program and becoming a professional artist, that is, until her respected male mentor gave her advice he thought was helpful and self-evident. Right there, in the public space of her sculpture class, he proclaimed: "Well, Mierle, I guess you know you can't be an artist now.' And I thought, 'What are you talking about?' I wanted to be a mother; it was a great blessing. But I was in a panic that it meant I couldn't be an artist."⁵

Looking back at this pivotal incident that occurred just before the birth in 1968 of her daughter Yael, the first of three children, Ukeles's deeply justifiable anger is still evident:

Through free choice and love, I became pregnant. I had a child by choice. I was in an all-out crisis. People only saw me as a mother. The culture had no place for me. There were no words for my life. I was split into two people: artist and mother. I had fallen out of the picture. I was in a fury.⁶

Stunned and outraged, Ukeles was inspired to write her manifesto. Driven by this fury, she composed the text in one sitting. The text made clear the differences between the male avant-garde attitude toward art, which she characterized as “The Death Instinct: separation, individuality . . .” and her new Maintenance Art, which was inspired by “The Life Instinct: unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and maintenance of the species . . .” This passionate philosophical and political text was an outpouring that helped Ukeles heal the painful schism between artist and mother reinforced by the male-dominated art world of the 1960s and 1970s in which she lived, a perverse division created by centuries of patriarchal rule. Her text was also a public pronouncement that this painful and ridiculous taboo against being an artist and a mother was dead. This revolutionary feminist manifesto announced that the identity of a mother and the identity of an artist in one woman were no longer irreconcilable and that this forced separation was no longer tolerable.

C. *Maintenance is a drag*; it takes all the fucking time, literally; the mind boggles and chafes at the boredom; the culture confers lousy status and minimum wages on maintenance jobs; housewives = no pay. Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby’s diaper, finish the report, correct the typos, mend the fence, keep the customer happy, throw out the stinking garbage, watch out—don’t put things in your nose, what shall I wear, I have no sox, pay your bills, don’t litter, save string, wash your hair, change the sheets, go to the store, I’m out of perfume, say it again—he doesn’t understand, seal it again—it leaks, go to work, this art is dusty, clear the table, call him again, flush the toilet, stay young.

D. *Art*:

Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art. 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, 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.

And in the most often quoted line from her manifesto, Ukeles asked, with perfect aplomb, “After the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?”

Ukeles’s groundbreaking pronouncement that she would continue to

carry out culturally defined women's daily tasks, "washing, cleaning, cooking, supporting . . ." and "exhibit them as art" is as revolutionary as the announcement made earlier in the twentieth century by the "father" of modern art, Marcel Duchamp, that art could be made from nonart, everyday objects. To articulate the sheer importance and yet drudgery of domestic tasks conducted by women and mothers and to simply and eloquently claim this work as art was a deeply provocative strategy. The art world patriarchy tried to make Ukeles cut off part of herself in favor of the other. She had a brilliant idea. Rather than give up, which was decidedly not an option, Ukeles wisely and outrageously took the matter-of-fact stance that her maternal work was the material from which art and cultural commentary could be made. The "Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969" is a feminist and humanist text that continues to resound in the twenty-first century.

This text was published with four curious black-and-white photographs staged by Ukeles and taken by her husband, Jack Ukeles. Each of these images delineates different acts of domestic labor. In "Maintenance Art: Dusting a Baffle," Ukeles is pictured in deep concentration as she cleans a shower curtain. This is the only photograph of the four in which Ukeles's body and face are clearly visible. The traditional feminine appearance of her elegant face and long wavy hair contrasts with the strength and size of her arm and hand, creating a domestic twist on the Rosie the Riveter representation of feminine strength. Next to this photograph is "Maintenance Art: Rinsing a B.M. Diaper," a raw, declarative image. The camera angle from above allows a full view into the toilet bowl, where the previously mentioned "B.M." is visible. The diaper at issue hangs above the toilet. It can be referred to as a "dirty diaper," or, if one is thinking in terms of Ukeles's new conception of Maintenance Art, the diaper can be reconceived as an object that simply fulfilled its function for the baby. Ukeles is only partially pictured in this photograph, but the evidence of her labor is undeniably evoked. In ironic sequence, the next photograph plays upon the knowledge given to the viewer from the previous image, that the artist is a mother. Thus in "Maintenance Art: Mopping the Floor," Ukeles plays on the patriarchal litany "barefoot and pregnant" as she is pictured bent over, with her bare feet steadying her body as she labors on a cracked linoleum floor. Irony turns to deadpan humor in "Maintenance Art: Pregnant Woman Cleaning a Chicken Foot." The light from the window to the side of Ukeles's body highlights her gently curved and clothed belly. However, this take on romantic, pictorialist photographs from the turn of the twentieth century is abruptly broken by the absence of the mother's face in the image. The viewer can surmise that Ukeles is not looking down at her pregnant belly as any dutiful woman should be doing.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art: Dusting a Baffle," 1969. Black-and-white photograph (an inflatable artwork). Photograph by Jack Ukeles. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Rather, she is focused on the work of "cleaning a chicken foot" in a tongue-in-cheek action of Dadaesque proportions. Viewing this image in class, one of my students asked me if this was a medieval practice that Jewish women performed when pregnant!

These thoughtfully orchestrated conceptual photographs were meant



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art: Rinsing a B.M. Diaper," 1969. Gelatin silver print. Photograph by Jack Ukeles. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

to support the new connections Ukeles was making between the maternal activities involved in maintaining domestic life and declaring these activities forms of art. In these images Ukeles photographically named herself to be a housewife, a mother, and an artist, breaking the taboo of the mother–artist in the face of the established systems of the commercial art world. As she



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art: Mopping the Floor," 1969. Gelatin silver print. Photograph by Jack Ukeles. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "Maintenance Art: Pregnant Woman Cleaning a Chicken Foot," 1969. Gelatin silver print. Photograph by Jack Ukeles. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

wrote in the manifesto, "Now, I will simply do these everyday things and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them as Art." In addition, Ukeles self-consciously performed these time-consuming domestic and maternal actions and had them photographically documented in order to make the viewer conscious that these actions are essential to nurturing life itself.

The political implications of nurturance and care conveyed in the “Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969” and its accompanying rhetorical images formed the basis for Ukeles’s ensuing maternal projects. *Maintenance Art Task: Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Come In* (1973) is a series of ninety-five contact prints that Ukeles framed together to demonstrate the repetitive and painstaking work involved in taking care of two young children, specifically during a chilly winter afternoon in New York City. A dust rag is attached to the overall photograph. Breaking through the grid format of the contact prints is an improvised ballet of tender and interlocking movements among four-and-a-half-year-old Yael, two-year-old Raquel, and their mother, Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Oftentimes in the images it is difficult to ascertain whether it is the mother or the children who are beginning the dressing and the undressing. This detailed piece delineates awkward and alluring confusion among their three interacting movements. The beautiful interplay of bodies touching, intertwining, and moving apart subtly describes the intersubjective knowledge of a mother who is in the act of working out



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Come In*, 1973. Detail from ninety-five black-and-white photographs. Each 3½ x 5 inches. Mounted on foam core, 55 x 42¼ inches overall plus chain and dust rag. Individual photographs by Joshua Siderowitz; overall photography by Jeffrey Sturges. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

how much of her own presence and support to give to the ever-changing development of her children. Many of us, not only mothers but grandmothers, fathers, grandfathers, other close relatives, or friends, might recall the everyday moments they have shared with children as epiphanies. We experience the deep realization that the child(ren) we care for still need our help, are awkwardly becoming independent, push us away, and call us back. Usually such moments go without being acknowledged or, if articulated by mothers, are silenced as “sentimental.” Ukeles refused the debasement of deep feelings of true sentiment in this work and created minimonuments to document the tenderness and power of these complex moments in her children’s lives through her perspective as mother and observer. Defying some postmodern interpretations of photography as a unilateral signal of mourning, Ukeles’s photographic grids function as loving, matter-of-fact memorials to growth and change. Her sense of her own self-knowledge as a mother is deeply embedded in these images, which echo her joyous and revelatory statement, “I rediscovered the world when I had a child.”⁷

Soon after this photographic Maintenance Art event took place, Ukeles conducted another Maintenance Art event that played out the psychic dilemmas of working as an artist and a mother, especially in a culture where there was (and still is) little if any understanding or support for mother-artists professionally and emotionally. Its multiple titles signify the poignant and uneasy intersubjectivities at work in this piece. *Some Kinds of Maintenance Cancel Out Others, Keep Your Head Together—1,000 Times, or Babysitter Hangup—Incantation Ritual* (1974) was a conceptual performance held at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Ukeles followed a strict order in which, according to her “Procedure,” she carried out the following activities:

1. Begin: Call New York long distance & ask babysitter if babies (3) are o.k.? o.k.
2. Hang string back and forth across full length of gallery (30 ft.).
3. Read each set of statements out loud on each page.
4. Stamp each page with Maintenance Art Stamp.
5. Clip it to string.
6. Move on to next identical page.
7. Fill up whole space with words and sheets, move up the stairs and outside to boundary of I.C.A.—street.
8. If I say it enough times, (maybe) it will come true.
9. Call N.Y.C. and ask babysitter if children are o.k.? o.k.

END

(Repeated approx. 500 times)⁸

The piece continued and, as Ukeles's instructions noted, repeated these movements about five hundred times as she insistently called home again and again and asked the babysitter if the children were "o.k." I have quoted the entire text from Ukeles's "Procedure" rather than putting it into the prose of my writing because her unmediated text best articulates the anxiety she performed in this Maintenance Art event. Especially striking to me about this performance event is the "Incantation Ritual" aspect of its repetitions. As Ukeles so aptly wrote in her Procedure notes, "If I say it enough times, (*maybe*) it will come true" (emphasis mine). The "it" she wrote about in her notes relates directly to "it's o.k. to have a babysitter for the good of the mother and the good of the family." To work in any artistic activity, to be in that space of creativity and deep inner focus, to be away from your child(ren) physically or emotionally and to know you feel whole and good about it . . . most of the time, some of the time, until you miss being with him or her or them, until you think you should be there . . . until your creative work time is up. Ukeles further emphasized these complex relations between self and others by making this maternal ambivalence the very subject of her work. Rather than elide the intense separations of the maternal self, she hypercontextualized them by performing the pain and indecision that this highly coded cultural dilemma created for her, and for countless other feminist mother-artists then and now. What is crucial here is that Ukeles left her children in New York City to do her work as an artist in Boston. She certainly did not abandon them. She left them with a babysitter—"o.k.?" Ukeles's deeply felt rhetorical stance challenged societal norms about the mother's place while it also admitted her own conflicted maternal identities.

These conflicts are explicit in the multiple titles of this performance event. *Some Kinds of Maintenance Cancel Out Others* seems to be an uneasy acceptance of the fact that when the mother-artist takes care of her child(ren) her artwork wanes, and when performing her art she must at times be absent from being the primary caregiver for her child(ren). The desires to do both are often irreconcilable. The canceling out of one desire for the other may not be the case all the time, but the title indicates there is no smooth intersection of needs or desires. One's own inner intersubjectivities—the relations between the mother and the artist, and vice versa—do not always intersect. *Keep Your Head Together—1,000 Times* articulates the difficulty of these self-abyssees and the psychic strength called upon to "keep your head together." Ukeles not only felt this struggle, she articulated it "1,000 times." In Ukeles's third possibility for the title of this performance, she used parlance from the time to ironically evoke that she had a problem needing a babysitter: *Babysitter Hangup—Incantation Ritual* refers not only to the repetition of

her phone calls to the babysitter to make sure that her three kids in New York City are OK, and that it's OK to have a babysitter, but to the entire mantra of the performance, summed up in number 8 of her "Procedure": "If I say it enough times, (maybe) it will come true."

The maternal anxiety that Ukeles made so poignantly evident in *Some Kinds of Maintenance Cancel Out Others . . . Incantation Ritual* was further played out through performances in the natural environment in *Maintenance Art Event: Fall Time Variations I–III*. This work is composed of three events that took place at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, on November 7, 1974, and were projected to last into the future. Tinged with Ukeles's serious sense of humor, this suite of performance works pays homage to nature, reproduction, women's life cycles, passage of time, death, re-birth, and memory.

The first performance event was *Fall Time Speed-Up: Husbanding Piece*, in which Ukeles cleared the leaves from the area where they had fallen underneath a magnificent hundred-year-old oak tree. Clearing this area left a smooth, open, green rectangle that, Ukeles realized later, could never stay in that state of "purity":

I was trying to keep it pure, but the tree wouldn't let me. The tree had other ideas. I learned the impossibility of purity—if you become obsessed with it, it can turn into something else. I realized that I couldn't control it. The piece was also about having to choose which element you are protecting. I was snowed by the beauty of the oak tree protecting its own resources, letting the leaves drop.⁹

"Letting the leaves drop" can be understood metaphorically as children leaving their source of life, leaving their mother. Indeed, the irony of this process in nature being called "husbanding" certainly did not escape Ukeles. In the next stage of *Fall Time Variations*, *The Trees Are Having Their Period: Time Slice*, she made a fifty-foot-long sanitary napkin for the oak tree. The sanitary napkin was constructed on a large scale so that it would be appropriate for the size of the tree. After cradling each leaf in her hands, Ukeles carefully laid them between three layers of gauze, cheesecloth, and fiberfill. Then she rolled up the sanitary napkin and placed it in a garbage bag, making further connections between the tree and women's processes of life. The enlarged scale of this work inevitably recalls the practices of male pop artists of the 1960s, especially those artists who made large-scale objects that mimicked those found in women's domestic spaces.¹⁰ However, Ukeles's strategy made it clear that her artwork was not a parody or a trivialization of women's work or bodies, but an ode to female labor—not without its own sense of irony and humor. Indeed, she sang an "incantation" to the tree as she circled it:



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Fall Time Speed-Up: Husbanding Piece*. Part of *Fall Time Variations I*, 1974. Performed at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

O tree, you are having your period
Everyone is saying how beautiful it is

You laid your eggs, some made it some didn't
Fucked by the wind & rain
Your children have all flown away
Maybe they'll make it
Maybe the birds will eat their seeds or they'll get
washed down the sewer. They'll never grow up.

...

At first I thought the tree was the mother & the
leaves were the children. The mother bore them
fed them held on to them through storms and cold
nights and bird dooties. And now they're dying
and leaving her. How sad the Fall is.

—or leaving her and dying—

—Kids aren't supposed to die first—

But that's not true!

First of all the leaves aren't the *seeds*.
 The seeds are the children. . . .
 Second, the leaves feed the tree too not just the other
 way around—like the mouth feeds the stomach
 not the stomach sends the food out to the cells—
 Take out energy—free home delivery.
 Rather, the leaves are the WOMB
 . . .

But when that job's over, when the egg's gone or
 the baby's ready for the world—ready or not—
 Mother; it's taking off Goodbye.
 Sister you'd better believe it: it's time to shuck it
 shed it.
 . . .

Your season, your period's almost over
 Barren sticks
 alone waitin sleepin
 Waitin for the juicy Spring again

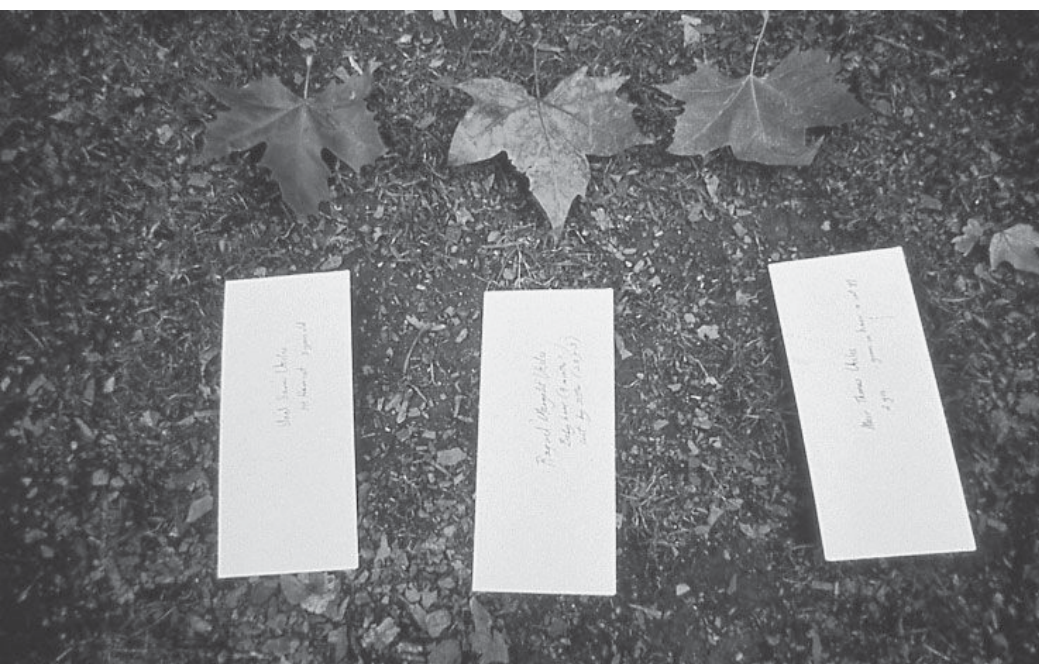
Please dear G——d¹¹



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *The Trees Are Having Their Period: Time Slice*. Part of *Fall Time Variations II*, 1974. Performed at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

In *Fall Time Variations III, Children's Piece: Time Stop (Tree Droppings—The Leaving Home of the Leaves)*, the psychic rather than the bodily work of the maternal is at issue. Ukeles chose three leaves that had fallen from the magnificent hundred-year-old oak tree that stands in for the mother in the *Variations* suite. Each leaf was a different color: burnt orange, golden yellow, and gilded green, representing the beauty and change that occur during fall. These leaves also stood in as markers for her three children; the piece would be completed in stages, when each child turned eighteen years old. Ukeles mingled earth from around the oak tree with each of the leaves. She then placed these organic materials in three different envelopes, adding to each a snippet of hair from each of her three children. The ritual-like performance of the piece—as in the extreme care with which Ukeles prepared the soil and her children's hair to return to the earth and the calling out of her children's names—further weds this work to a quasi-religious ceremony merging death rites with the promise of the future.

Ukeles's written "Procedure" for the piece indicated that these envelopes would be maintained until her children left home. In rhythmic order, this written document stated that:



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Children's Piece: Time Stop* (detail), *Tree Droppings—The Leaving Home of the Leaves*. Part of *Fall Time Variations III*, 1974. Performed at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York. Copyright Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Yael will be 18 in 1986

Raquel will be 18 in 1988

Meir will be 18 in 1996

At which time the piece will be completed.

What is severed and what grows BACK? NEW?

Reflecting on this piece years later, Ukeles said she was thinking about her children leaving her, as she did her mother: "I think it's one of the hardest parts of being a mother, their leaving. The tree lets the leaves go. From the tree's point of view, it's good for the tree. Mothers can prevent their children from growing."¹²

This piece poetically and unabashedly addressed maternal issues and created a feminist statement in its acceptance that children are individual human beings both connected to and distinct from their mothers. To make such a statement is an admission of love, a succumbing to difference, and a difficult acceptance of the ambiguity of intimacy within the mother-child bond. Yet this work also concealed its desire to hold on to one's children under the guise of letting them go. It created a psychic and earthly haven for mourning their leaving. This metaphorical safe space calms and strengthens the mother as she terrifyingly projects years into the future when her children will be older. I recognize in this piece this secret code of the mother's mourning. It began for me paradoxically at the point when my relationship with my infant son was deeply physical, rich in potential, joyous, frightening, unnameable. Thinking of my son as older was and still is similar to imagining the impossible. I continue to tell myself that it will never be a separation but an inevitable sadness that will turn into joy as I realize that my son is moving into the world differently, "on his own." "On his own," as if that is a valid aspiration, born as it is from patriarchal concepts of individuality and isolation. Rather, for me, I feel that to be "on his own" is also needing me or, better yet, wanting my love and friendship, hoping it will never become an artifact, but will continually take on new textures. Whether accepting codified ideas of cultural separation, the "letting them go"—part Freudian and part capitalist realism (everything is trivialized and commodified)—separation is still painful, especially as a projection into an unknowable future. Ukeles's *Children's Piece: Time Stop* conveys her rejection of patriarchal discourse for a feminist embrace of genuinely experienced maternal fears and desires.

Rarely does public art interact with the domestic realm or intimate desires. By infusing her public performance art with the foundation of the maternal, Ukeles questions false dichotomies. She mourns and attempts to repair the physical and psychic damage that results from tearing apart the

deep connections between the political and the intimate, female and male, and the human body and its sustaining life systems. Thinking about her encompassing working philosophy, Ukeles has said that “a feeling of vulnerability and interdependency is what my art is all about, and that’s a religious position, to feel that and say that it’s okay to be vulnerable and dependent. It’s actually wonderful.”¹³ In addition, Ukeles’s deep rethinking of institutionalized spatial and gender boundaries suggests entirely new ways of experiencing the joys of human relationship and the structures that support them. Her generous and open-ended philosophies of working with and through gender constructs, both in her work on the maternal and with male and female maintenance workers, suggest deep affinities with philosopher Sara Ruddick’s complete rethinking of the maternal. One of Ruddick’s central insights is to think of mothering as a form of work or practice rather than as an identity taken on only by mothers. “To mother” is a verb, an activity and not a noun, a naming, a fixed identity.¹⁴ Deeply related to Ukeles’s thinking on the maternal are Ruddick’s ideas on the work of mothering as a form of reflection on and connection with other kinds of work. She also conceives of the work of mothering as “gender-full and gender-free,” a particularly potent philosophical concept.¹⁵

Ukeles’s working affinities with these seemingly paradoxical yet deeply interconnected ideas—“gender-full” nurturing work as a mother–artist and simultaneously “gender-free,” gender-open sorts of caring in which she created connections with male and female maintenance workers in her CARE projects—suggest a new becoming for the work of caring for children and for the world. In harmony with Ruddick’s ideas, Ukeles also bestows these maternal gifts on men and all kinds of other mothers who sustain life, health, and happiness for their children in their own particular and appropriate ways. It is absolutely central that Ukeles identifies her work as a mother with her concerns for the labor of others. This is her foundation. It gives her the freedom and creativity to take maternal qualities such as caring for and sustaining life and passion in others and set these qualities into motion elsewhere, outside of herself. For Ukeles, the maternal is a place of embrace, strength, and joy. She is not embarrassed to take the maternal outside the intimate and incorporate it into the realm of public performance, conceptual, and environmental art.

The snippets of Ukeles’s children’s hair that she enshrined in *Children’s Piece, Time Stop* take me back to the remembrance of my father’s silky locks, enmeshed as they will always be in the image of my son’s light-colored hair and tenderness. I remember, too, the evening on April 5, 2000, when Ukeles

presented her work on the occasion of the opening of the Women's Rites conference at the university where I teach. She shared with us that evening that April 5 also marks the passing of her father, Rabbi Manuel Laderman. I am awed that in the midst of writing about human labor and the maternal, Ukeles's soulful artwork takes me to a place close to her father and to mine, to his respect for work and to Ukeles's open-ended sense of gender, care, and interdependence.

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Mamas Out of Place

MATERNAL WORK AS AN ACTIVE PROJECTION of the labor and care called for to create a more humane and just world is also to be found in the art and thinking of the next generation of artist–mothers. They strategically rethink traditional aspects of the maternal to create artwork that challenges the conventional place of the mother. In Arizona-based artist Ellen McMahon’s provocative artist’s book *No New Work* (1993), the central image pictures her infant daughter seen from the side, her lovely face aglow from the light coming in through a window from which she peers out with wonder and determination. The infant girl moves the curtains aside to get a better look at what lies outside. From the mother’s point of view, the world is open to her young daughter. Yet the mother is not without trepidation armed with the maternal knowledge about the work she must perform as an artist and a mother to help fulfill her daughter’s dreams in a still-patriarchal world. *No New Work* was generated by McMahon’s thoughtful and clever response to the limited thinking exhibited by her male chairman at the first faculty meeting of the semester she joined the art department at the University of Arizona, Tucson, which took place just after McMahon’s unpaid pregnancy leave the semester before. She thus faced a difficult beginning of her tenure track at the university and the trials of having a three-week-old baby and a three-year-old child at home. At that meeting, the chairman

asked the faculty members, all male except for McMahan, to write down their accomplishments during the past year. McMahan was faced with the awful realization that she had no “accomplishments” to list that would be considered professional. No exhibitions, no speaking engagements, no publications. Soon after this awkward meeting, McMahan decided that she would reinterpret this “lack” as fruitful production. The result was her poignant and powerful *No New Work*. McMahan’s targeted response to the cultural and professional repression she faced as a mother–artist is deeply similar to Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s crucial and passionate refusal to submit to the limitations of the 1960s male art world a generation earlier that refused her “double identity” as an artist and a mother.

No New Work is composed of eight palladium prints on tracing vellum and letterpress on paper made from her infant daughter’s cloth diapers, the latter medium reminiscent of the bodily investment that Mary Kelly created earlier with her son in “Document I: Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts” of the *Post-Partum Document*. In *No New Work*, McMahan articulates a sense of future investment in social and cultural transformation through the central image of her young daughter. Above the imprint of her daughter, McMahan has placed vertically printed texts and horizontal headings that alternate between “Bonding Takes Time” and “No No No New Work”; below the image different texts appear in linear fashion that contradict the text printed in the circular design. Following the design just described, here are some of the texts:

vertical: Bonding; across: Takes Time

below: We push the fast track.

circular: Hear children and they will learn to listen. Learn to listen.

Listen.

vertical: No No No; across: New Work

below: We push the fast track.

circular: Guide and care for them.

below: We abhor weakness.

circular: Advocate for those who need help. Help those of us in need.

below: We hear money.

circular: Provide paid leave in times of personal crisis. Demand paid leave.

The accusations in McMahan’s texts, as in “We push the fast track,” and the proposals for a different social approach, such as “Guide and care for them,” recall some of contemporary artist Barbara Kruger’s media-inspired text-and-image works. In McMahan’s work, however, the plural “we” is used

B
O
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Takes Time



We push the fast track.

Learn to listen. Listen. Hear children and they will learn to listen. Learn to listen. Listen. Hear children and they will learn to listen. Learn to listen.

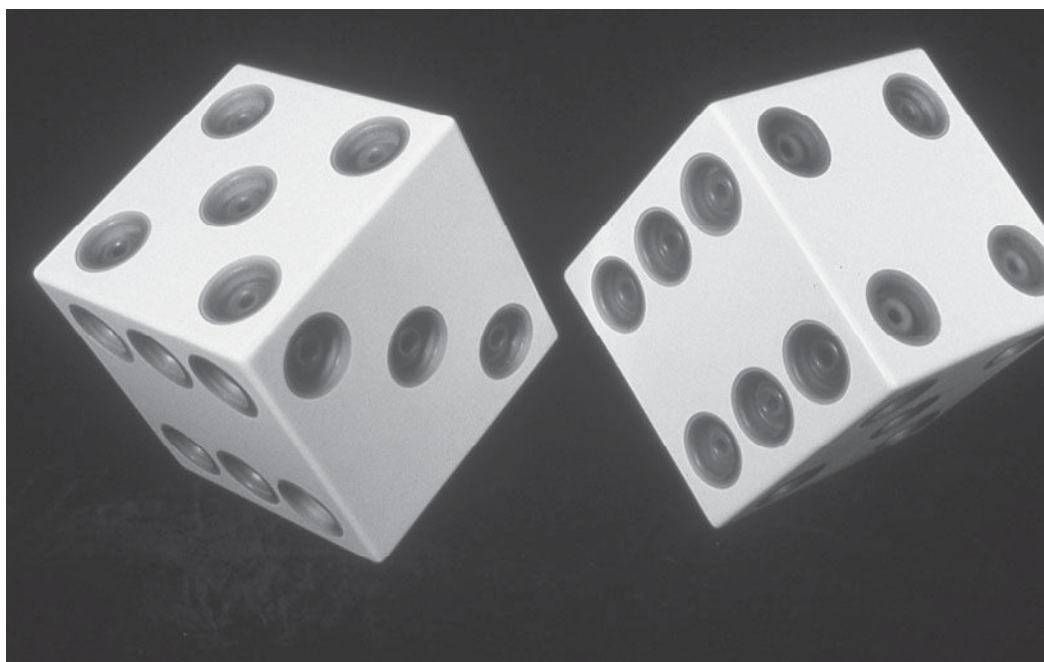
Ellen McMahon, *No New Work*, 1993. Letterpress on handmade paper made from cloth diapers and palladium prints on tracing vellum. Page size 17 x 11 inches; full installation 24 x 24 x 168 inches. Photograph by J. Keith Schreiber. Courtesy of the artist.

rather than Kruger's assumed "you." This perspective interestingly implicates the artist, as well as the viewer. The call for a more humane culture comes from a generalized imperative voice: "Hear children and they will learn to listen. Learn to listen. Listen." The imperative voice thus seems distant, unidentified. The text in these lines is also printed in the smallest typeface of all of the text. But the circular design in which the calls to action are printed brings attention to them through this dynamic structure. McMahon's calls for a deeper sense of social and cultural justice are thus pronounced in a voice that resounds between demand and quietude, as if these wise directives are simply the way to act. Similarly, the image of McMahon's daughter awakening goes beyond the singular mother's gaze, extending this visual emblem of the child into the future with hesitation and hope. The desires that underlie *No New Work* especially remind me of feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick's ideas on maternal thinking: "I was—and still am—interested in maternal thinking because of what maternal concepts might introduce into political and philosophic discussions. But maternal concepts can be reflective of mothers, and a help to them, only if they are anchored in thinking about children."¹

McMahon's other bodies of work on the maternal are characterized by a focus on the intimacies and ironies that result from the charged relationships she has with her two daughters. She has also done research on maternal sacrifice and cultural perceptions about mothers who kill their children, as portrayed in literature, the media, and real life. McMahon's diverse, ongoing work also includes small- and large-scale drawings, mixed-media installations, and performance work. In such work, McMahon explores the charged psychic and bodily dimensions of the maternal. Among these, a particularly stunning work stands out for me. *Mama Do You Love Me?* (1996) is the title of an installation whose haunting question resounds with pain and uncertainty.² Such a plaint, which represents a form of the child's control over the mother, tore at McMahon's heart and provoked her sadness that her child would voice such a question. Rather than hide from her first daughter's distressing question, McMahon transformed this taboo conflict into the intimacy of doubt and displayed such powerful maternal emotions in a public space. She constructed oversized objects that refer to baby care, such as a plaster nipple measuring more than four feet high and equally large sets of *Nipple Dice* made of wood into which she inserted off-scale, handmade objects that mimic baby bottle nipples. The viewer-participant walked into a darkened space where these objects were dramatically lit. Barely a foot taller than these surreal, mock baby accoutrements, I remember feeling physically and emotionally overwhelmed by the haunting sense they evoked about the risks and difficulties involved in my and other mothers'



Ellen McMahon, *Nipple*, detail from *Mama Do You Love Me?* 1996. Plaster and baby powder. Installation with sound and light. Room size 18 x 25 feet. Photograph by J. Keith Schreiber. Courtesy of the artist.



Ellen McMahon, *Nipple Dice*, detail from *Mama Do You Love Me?* 1996. Wood and baby bottle nipples. Installation with sound and light. Room size 18 x 25 feet. 48 x 48 x 48 inches. Photograph by J. Keith Schreiber. Courtesy of the artist.

responsibilities. I also felt overtaken by the highly coded references to the intersubjective needs of both the mother and the child. The repetition of McMahan's daughter's recorded voice heard at unexpected intervals plaintively asking, "Mama, do you love me?" deeply reverberated in the darkened installation space and within me.

The child's hurtful question upsets the properly proportioned love a mother is supposed to give unconditionally and on demand. The artist's desire to exhibit mother-child ambivalence recalls the way feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin thinks about the importance of "the subject position" in postmodern theory: "It means reflecting on the perspective of our knowledge and accepting the paradoxes that can arise from an ability to identify with more than one perspective. To accept paradox is to contain rather than resolve contradictions, to sustain tension between elements heretofore defined as antithetical."³ One of the most crucial paradoxes for the feminist mother is ambivalence, the acceptance of which allows her to own the contradictions in her maternal feelings and responses to the loved other, to her child. What is most important about this ambivalence is that it allows for an intersubjectivity that is not always perfectly proportioned between mother and child.⁴

Conversely, one of the most intersubjective acts performed between mother and child is that of breast-feeding. For the feminist mother, breast-feeding can be experienced and articulated as a taboo pleasure, not only as an act of giving sustenance to her child. It must be stated that for some mothers this act is difficult, far from pleasurable, or simply impossible for physical or other reasons. But for those who are able to and choose to, breast-feeding is a maternal space of luxury. Its riches are felt by the infant and experienced by the mother through the sometimes perfectly matched system of mutual giving and receiving. For me, breast-feeding was oftentimes a matter of giving in to my infant son's needs, no matter what I wanted to be engaged in. Yet, succumbing to his absolute needs, I would hunker down on our couch with a book or a journal and enjoy the hour or longer in our mutually pleasurable bodily and intellectual nourishment. I looked forward to these long, luscious moments of active rest and caressing, a dreamy absorption of one into the other. I would often simply and fully watch my infant son's elegant and focused movements as he concentrated on getting his sustenance. I muse on how his determined manner of breast-feeding when he was so little is curiously akin to the careful and deliberate ways he fulfills many of his school and domestic tasks now as a teenager on the way to becoming a young man.

That the act of breast-feeding if performed in public to maintain an in-

fant's life whenever she or he needs to be nourished is considered in bad taste, even scandalous, is one of those patriarchal taboos in the United States that seems infinitely senseless. Women's breasts, don't we know, are supposed to belong to her lover or any *man* who desires her. It is still that tired yet persistent matter of stolen ownership over women's bodies. The reasons for debasing breast-feeding are obvious if made complicated by hidden and shameful patriarchal devices. A few days after my son was born and I was in the hospital learning how to have him take my milk, the headlines reported that a woman was harassed for breast-feeding in a restaurant in Beverly Hills, California. Even in such a wealthy area, a woman who could afford her lunch was still deprived of her maternal rights. The waiter asked her if she could "do that in the bathroom." I wish I knew what her direct response was. A lawsuit followed.

The collaborative artist group M.A.M.A. also challenged such downright stupidity and suppression of the mother's and the infant's rights through provocative public performance work. M.A.M.A. is the acronym for Mother Artists Making Art, a group of mother-artists—Karen Schwenkmeyer, Lisa Schoyer, Deborah Oliver, Lisa Mann, and Athena Kanaris—who collectively have backgrounds in performance, writing, dance, film, video, photography, and installation work. This group was formed, as its statement beautifully conveys:

[To] support each other in salvaging, theorizing and representing through artworks, our experience of being mothers, especially in teasing out those experiences which are invisible or taboo in terms of the norms (for example the sensual possibilities of pregnancy, breast feeding and the relation of mother and child, are taboo in this culture.) It is these unspoken experiences which are in danger of being buried and forgotten. It is these *subtle dissenting signals* [emphasis mine] that have the possibility of spawning models that can finally turn our understanding upside down.

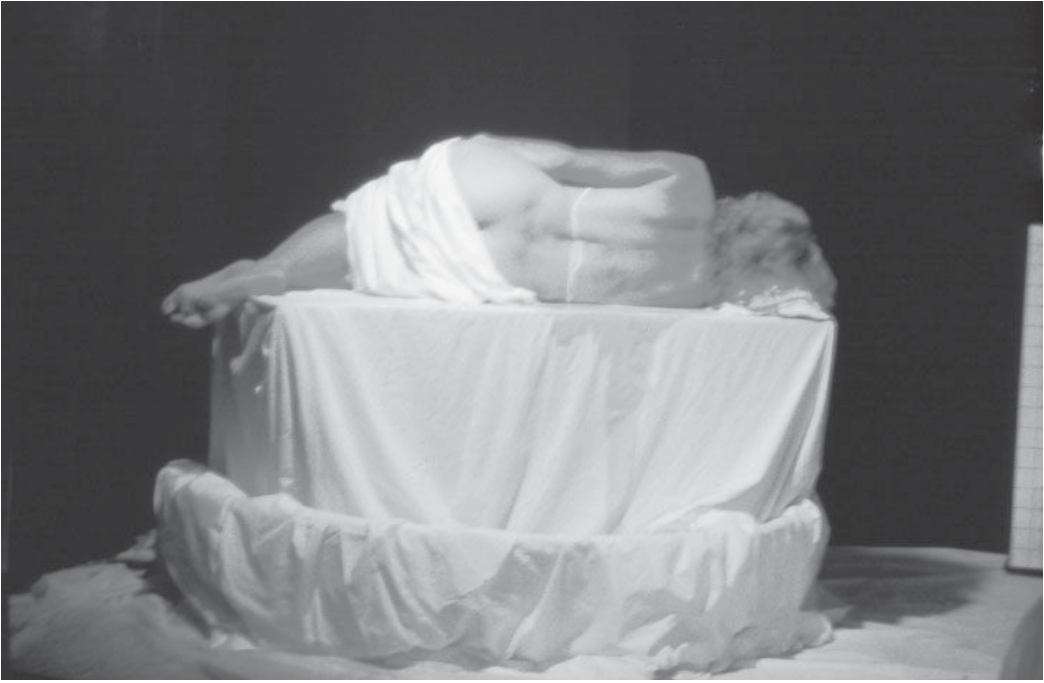
Their statement also acknowledged the earlier Los Angeles collective Mother Art and the work it produced in various venues in the city, most noteworthy the site of Laundromats (discussed in chapter 1). M.A.M.A.'s alignment with Mother Art created a crucial lineage in the work of artist-mothers who set out to bring alive unacknowledged and disrespected maternal experiences and to publicly transform them into maternal discourses. M.A.M.A. performed *Milkstained* at the Electronic Café International in Santa Monica, California, as a webcast event for L.A. Freewaves on September 13, 1998. *Milkstained* is a conceptually challenging and visually magnificent performance on breast-feeding.

I will never forget the opening of the piece, in which a nude woman lay sideways on a horizontal pedestal that was beautifully draped with light-colored fabric, her back facing the audience. A creamy-white cloth covered part of her buttocks and legs. The dramatically lit figure against the darkness of the stage and the gorgeous power of this intimate scene reminded me of Jacques-Louis David's painting *The Death of Marat* (1793). The element of liquid was unequivocal. A white substance began to flow forth and run down her back, at first slowly and then with more force as it stained the material and flowed into a large draped basin on the floor. Magnificently, against the dead silence of the scene, the ebb and flow of the woman's breast milk were audible. After this singular opening, the stage was filled with multiple activities performed by the M.A.M.A. members, including reading texts about and projecting images of themselves breast-feeding, expressing their milk onstage, and building a tower of plastic champagne glasses that they filled with their own fresh milk. The sounds of bodily fluids punctuated the performance, "spilling, pouring, dripping, a sense of a fantastic abundance, the release of bodily fluids as in the sexual act, the tension and feeling of disorder produced by liquids overrunning their containers" (M.A.M.A. statement). The performance culminated in a provocative gesture in which they offered their fresh breast milk to the audience.

M.A.M.A. planned this performance to be challenging even to an engaged contemporary audience; they played with the viewer-participants' gut reactions. *Milkstained* was also a challenging gesture toward characterizations in the Western philosophical tradition of women's and mothers' bodies as chaotic and disorderly because of our uncontrollable, hysterical fluids—blood, milk, emotions, tears. In affinity with feminist psychoanalytic thinkers and their own bodily experiences, M.A.M.A. turned these metaphors into vitalizing and erotic maternal life forces. Hélène Cixous beautifully wrote a space for the maternal:

In woman there is always, more or less, something of "the mother" repairing and feeding, resisting separation, a force that does not let itself be cut off but that runs codes ragged. . . . Voice; milk that could go on forever. Found again. The lost mother/bitter-lost. Eternity: is voice mixed with milk.⁵

In the same year that M.A.M.A. produced *Milkstained*, the group also created another work on breast-feeding and the coexistence of the mother's voice. *Let Down* was installed, ironically and appropriately, at the site of a former jail. This installation was part of a large group exhibition, *Without Alarm II: Public and Private Security*, curated by the Arroyo Arts Collective, that took place in Lincoln Heights, California. *Let Down*



M.A.M.A., *Milkstained*, 1996. Performance. Photograph by Tadayuki Miyashiro. Courtesy of Karen Schwenkmeyer.

was installed inside a small jail cell with the door closed. “Let down” is the medical term that refers to the moment, finally, after an often-painful buildup, when the milk flows out of the mother’s breasts. Although the metaphors of isolation and unlawfulness of the jail cell are appropriate for a work about mothers out of place, mothers who breast-feed in public, this was also a space designed by M.A.M.A. to feel contemplative. Everything was painted white—the walls, the ceiling, the built-in space for a bed and a sink. As in *Milkstained*, a continuous flow of milky fluid was ever-present in this quiet space as it streamed out of the sink’s faucet. One participant was allowed into the space at a time. The only place to sit or recline was in the area where there once had been a bed. Strewn along this space were pieces of white paper cut like the small pieces of paper in fortunes cookies that, when opened, revealed mothers’ feelings about breast-feeding, from its difficulties to its erotic pleasures. I remember enjoying the power of the mixed metaphors at work in this cozily confined and reflective space. I might even have noted some of my own feelings and experiences on these miniature pieces of paper in order to contribute to

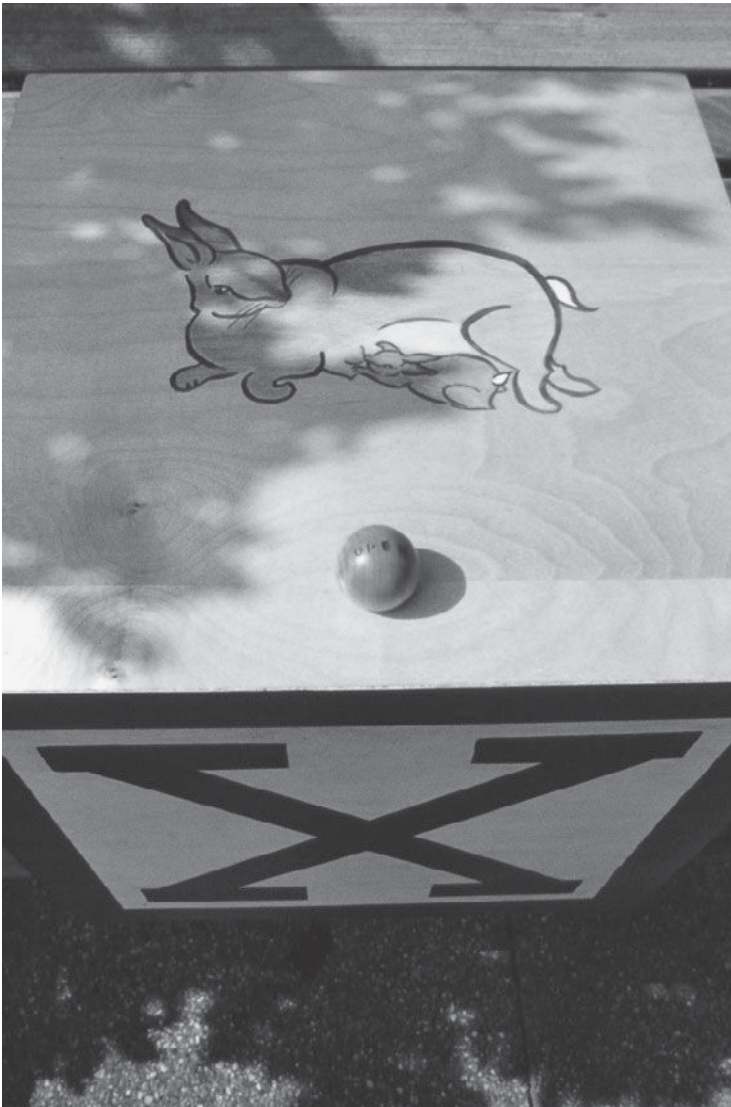


M.A.M.A., *Let Down*, 1996. Installation. Photograph by Karen Schwenkmeyer. Courtesy of the artist.

the growing knowledge of and documentation on breast-feeding from a feminist maternal perspective.

Approaching the complex subject of breast-feeding in the United States through yet another point of view, M.A.M.A. produced a third public work in 1998 titled *California Civil Code 43.3*. The title refers to the state law finally passed in 1997 that made it legal for women to breast-feed in public. Astoundingly, this law was passed despite the deep psychic disgust and embarrassment this act of life causes for many people. Aware of the huge divide between legality and common mass feelings, M.A.M.A. set up a project in an upscale, outdoor shopping mall in Old Town Pasadena to provoke this chasm of public reactions. They created a box resembling a child's block painted with images of animals nursing their young and positioned this curious object on a bench located in the open-air mall. Sounds of an infant's insistent cry emanated from the box. Curious shoppers who opened the lid of the box encountered a video monitor showing images of mothers breast-feeding and an audio text of M.A.M.A. members describing their feelings and ideas about the act in which they were engaged. The group videotaped many unsuspecting viewers and their responses to this installation.

The video and audio were already a step removed from the real and thus confronted its “audience” from a highly mediated position. Nonetheless, some were “disgusted,” as one passerby expressed, yet many others stopped to talk with M.A.M.A. and were adamant about mothers’ rights to nourish their infants and to breast-feed whenever and wherever it was necessary. M.A.M.A.’s wide-ranging public performance work on the deeply inter-subjective and highly charged act of breast-feeding has given articulate voice to the “silent dissenting signals” these feminist artist–mothers conjoined to send out.



M.A.M.A., *California Civil Code 43.3*, 1998. Installation. Photograph by Karen Schwenkmeyer. Courtesy of the artist.

Another mama out of place is Gail Rebhan, whose photographs and mixed-media work create a compelling assemblage of active and contemplative maternal observations structured to demonstrate her dissent from the conventional ways that children, especially boys, learn about gender, race, and ethnicity. In a series of work published in her artist's book *Mother-Son Talk: A Dialogue between a Mother and Her Young Sons* (1996),⁶ Rebhan conducted investigations of her two sons' domestic and social worlds through her visual study of their developing perceptions of these realms. Akin to Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, the objects Rebhan created and the conversations with her boys that she recorded function as artifacts of and memorials to crucial psychic moments of the everyday. However, rather than Kelly's redefined psychoanalytic focus on her son's early development and her active maternal thinking in response to their intimacies and distances, Rebhan's work began when her sons left the exclusiveness of the familial realm and entered the social world outside the home. As the mother of two sons, she has been and continues to be particularly concerned with and fascinated by how her boys respond to the often-distorted cultural and social images they receive about gender and the representation of women.

Especially compelling to me about the work Rebhan constructs based on issues of gender is that the form many of her art pieces take is in direct aesthetic relationship to the type of art media her boys are instructed to use in school as they progress through different grades. Works from this project reproduce media images as the screen upon which her sons make sense of the world. Rebhan thus demonstrates that the boys' perceptions are already prefabricated in part through standardized, institutionalized forms of expression. Nonetheless, their vivid and individual reception of knowledge about the world comes through. The mother then adds her own text to the boys' perceptions. Such is the case with *A tree, a house, a car* (1992), a xerograph in which her oldest son, then six years old, told her and her husband that girls cannot grow up to be anything they want. As Rebhan's written text at the left side of the image recounts, "I brace myself for a sexist comment. My husband and I exchange glances. Then my son says that's silly, girls can't grow up to be a tree, a house or a car." The absolute truth to the boy's innocent logic is ironically emphasized by Rebhan's reproduction of her son's drawings of a tree, a house, and a car, below which she placed the corresponding nouns.

In *Pronouns* (1992), a photograph collaged onto a xerograph, stories about the perception of gender continue with her younger son. Rebhan recounts that even at four years old, he had never used the female pronoun, although he could distinguish between boys and girls. She writes, "It drove

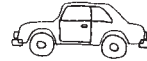
The whole family
is riding
in the car.
My six year old
is perplexed
by a song he heard
on Sesame Street.
The song says
that girls
can grow up to be
anything they want.
My son says
that is not true.
I brace
myself for
a sexist comment.
My husband and I
exchange glances.
Then my son says
that's silly,
girls can't grow
up to be



a tree,



a house



or a car.

I agree that
women can't be
those things.
But I reply
men can't be
those things
either. I know
responds my son.
I'm relieved.

Gail S. Rebhan, *A tree, a house, a car*, 1992. Xerograph, 18½ x 31½ inches. Courtesy of the artist.

me crazy. Mommy is reading his book . . ." This pronoun problem unexpectedly changed when both boys were watching two women wrestler-actresses on television, a ludicrous image that Rebhan reproduces in this project. Her son yells, "They're HER wrestlers!" Below the image of these two women, Rebhan's text coyly states, "Ever since then my son uses pronouns correctly."

I am drawn to the humorous, ironic, and dead-serious maternal gaze Rebhan set into motion in this series of works. It is crucial that she positioned herself as an active observer in her encounters with her sons as she amusingly anticipated sexist attitudes from them. Seemingly self-evident, these works reveal the deep mysteries and infinite subtleties of children's, and in this case, her sons' developing cultural perceptions of gender and, by association, their perceptions of their own mother. They also give testimony to the shifting textures of Rebhan's dissenting maternal observations and open-minded realizations.

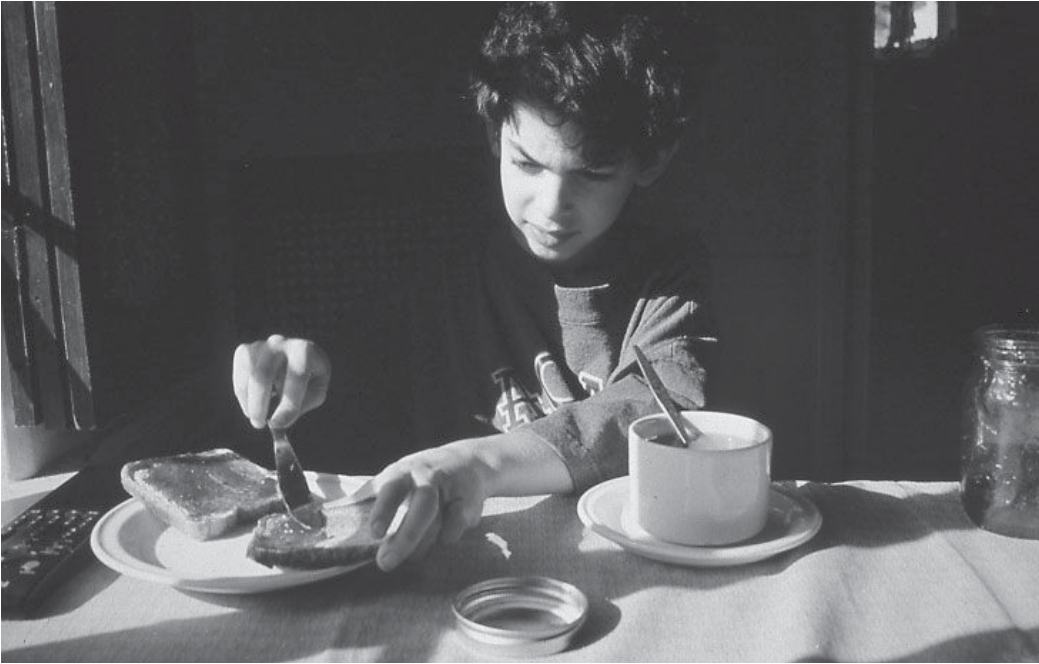
In 1997, a few years after Rebhan worked on the images that were published in the *Mother-Son Talk* artist's book, she produced several untitled

black-and-white photographic portraits of both of her sons. The mother's gaze in these lovely portraits differs from those in the previous series. In these images, Rebhan allowed herself the erotic space of the maternal to gaze upon her sons, no longer infants or small children, and take in their utter sensuousness. Her photographic gaze is a caress. In one of these untitled photographs, she pictures her oldest son from the back, focusing on his furry hairline that softly extends from the back of his head and down his neck. His close-up figure occupies the entire photograph, which Rebhan has framed against a blurred landscape. Thus the tones and shadows on his skin and the soft folds on his T-shirt covering his slight shoulders occupy the viewer's and this mother's gaze. In another portrait, Rebhan pictures her younger son in an everyday scene reminiscent of the lusciousness of light and darkness and the delicacies of food that are found in eighteenth-century European still life and genre paintings. Her son's dark hair and sweatshirt blend into the velvety background as light filtering in from the side window illuminates the table, a white cup and saucer, and the boy's hands and face as he prepares warm morning toast.

Judith Hopkins also works with the photographer–mother's careful, caring, and focused gaze, extending her observations beyond the familial to



Gail S. Rebhan, untitled, 1997. C-print, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



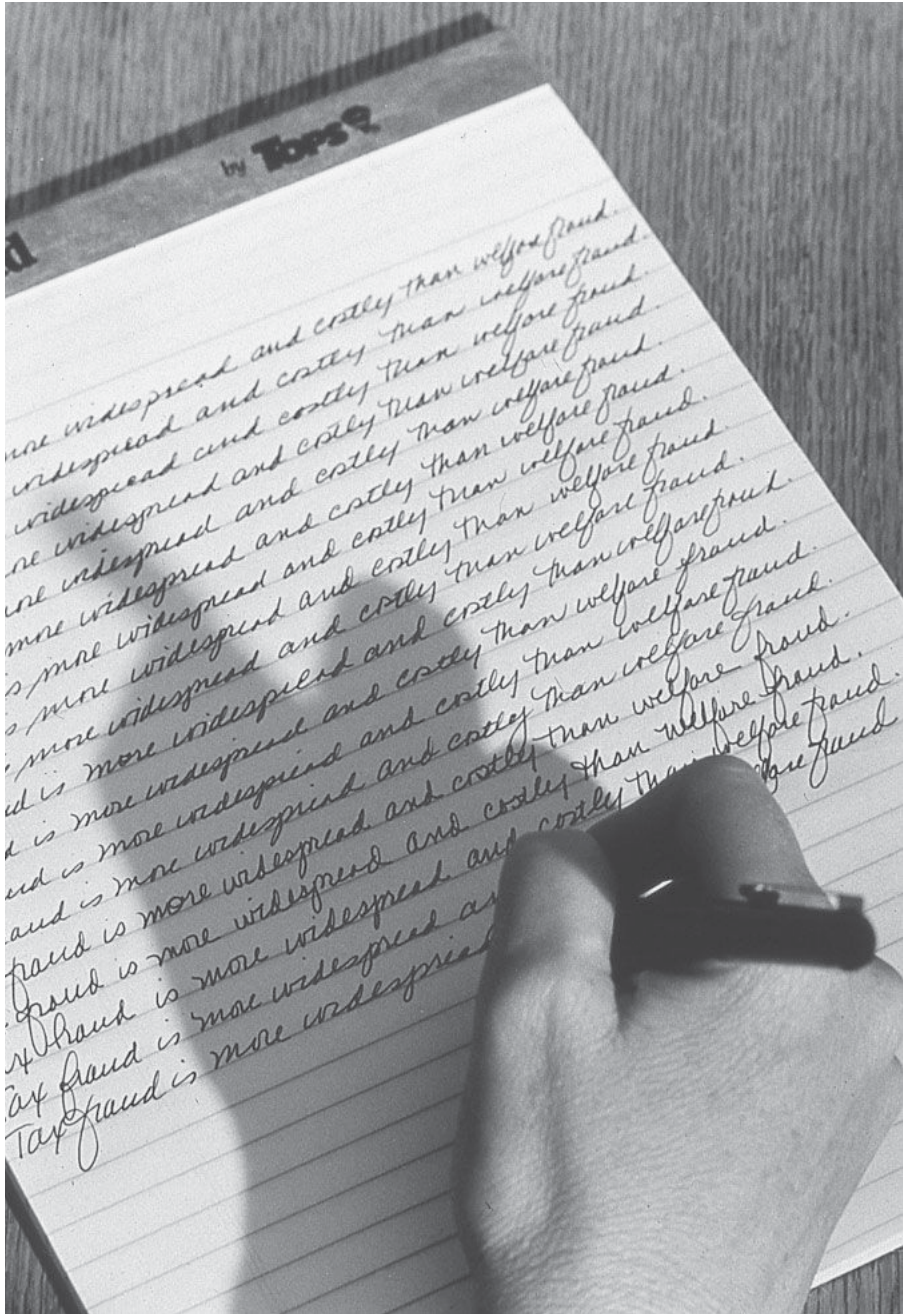
Gail S. Rebhan, untitled, 1997. C-print, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

encompass other mothers and their children. Her photographic and text project *Stretching It: Surviving on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children)* (1994) was produced as a suite of color photographs and as a pamphlet for public dissemination with the support of the Cultural Affairs Department of the city of Los Angeles. In this unusual project, Hopkins cleverly manipulates documentary photographic strategies of the victim to give mothers living in poverty the voice and sense of personhood they deserve. This project offers poignant, cogent, and forceful perspectives on the perverse ethics of government aid and maternal responses to refusing victimhood in these circumstances. This is a transformative, activist project that performs an ironic interplay between critical moments of domestic life involving mothers and their children and the macropolitics of government agencies confronted with maternal acts that defy passivity and enforced poverty.

Stretching It is a powerful, multivoice project composed of stories narrated by mothers who have undergone transformations in their senses of motherhood and empowerment, as well as their accounts of the degradation of being on or trying to receive AFDC. Hopkins's photographs heighten the pathos and irony of these women's accounts. The photographs, both

documentary and staged, work with the mothers' stories to accentuate the misconceptions perpetuated by the welfare system. In one particularly effective orchestration of photograph, text, and research, Hopkins represents a mother's experience of undergoing days of scrutiny and hours of handwriting exercises to prove she did not sign and cash her check and then report it missing in order to receive another one. In the booklet and in the exhibition, Hopkins placed next to this story information from her research indicating that fraudulent overpayments are a tiny fraction of all aid paid to needy families. Furthermore, we learn that half of all overpayments are the result of administrative error and that most client errors are honestly made because of the complexity of the welfare system. The staged photograph that she juxtaposed against this text strategically mimics the woman's experiences of being infantilized and disciplined. As if in high school detention, the shamed mother is made to write a single sentence *ad infinitum*. Yet the single handwritten sentence on the notepad speaks not of the mother's supposed crime; it addresses the criminality of the better-off: "Tax fraud is more widespread and costly than welfare fraud."

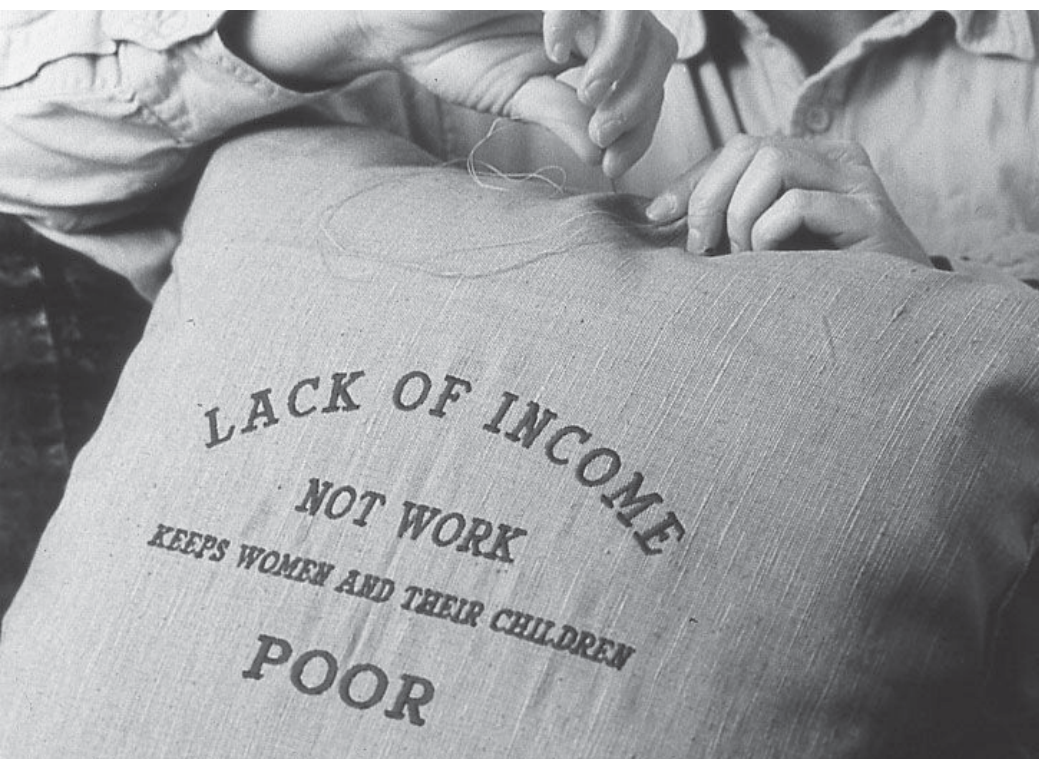
Working within a renewed feminist concept of the documentary tradition, Hopkins refused to frame the mothers and their children as victims. She would not allow their poverty to determine their representation and thus photographically brand them as victims. Rather than "revictimize the victim," she chose to articulate how facile it is to confuse a mother's circumstances with the definition of her status as a human being.⁷ Her economic situation does not dumbly reflect her life, relationships, or self. Furthermore, her stories and experiences count more than her physical appearance. Thus Hopkins never pictured any woman's or child(ren)'s faces. The staged photographs, texts, and crucial resources accompanying them set up an ironic interplay between the mothers' accounts and the actual disrespect and mistreatment they have experienced. To represent the effects of such treatment simply through documentary photographs of the mothers and their families is impossible since much of this damage is psychic and, as such, is unrepresentable. Thus Hopkins and the women she worked with created cleverly scripted reenactments that expose the ludicrous logic of government "aid." These collaboratively composed images and texts also question the supposition that if there is a link between women having a hard time and the government, the relation could only be that of criminality—especially if the mothers in question dare to ask for help, make an appeal for assistance, breach the mold of those heroic, patriotic, sacrificing mythic mothers who hold up the sky while managing to live in a shoe. That mother had so many children she didn't know what to do, but I'll bet she never left an abusive



Judith Hopkins, *Stretching It: Surviving on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children)*, 1994. C-print, 24 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

spouse or sought government assistance. To ask for help and to make an appeal to another is not necessarily to make oneself a victim. It is a difficult choice that accrues power in its confronting another body, institutional or personal, with its need.

The ethics of government assistance are underscored to project the one in need as always and inevitably victimized . . . and female. Consider historical images of men heroically lined up for unemployment benefits, unencumbered, no children in tow. Unemployment benefits mean they performed work. And the payments are finite. But women woefully keep having babies. That must mean they will never really be able to work, nor do they love their children. Thus, as the perverse logic continues, it is obscene and scandalous for these mothers to ask for help. In her personal account, one of the mothers Hopkins interviewed cogently addressed this painful contradiction: "Without childcare it doesn't make any sense ever filling out a job application. I love spending time with my son. If I were a professional woman who gave up her career to be a housewife and mother,



Judith Hopkins, *Stretching It: Surviving on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children)*, 1994. C-print, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

people would think that was wonderful, but there's a real double standard if you're on welfare."

Hopkins's provocative, densely packed book and photographic exhibition are part activist documentary, part biographical account, and part stereotype-breaking research. *Stretching It* inaugurates a new hybrid genre of documentary feminist activism, especially in its inclusion of crucial information on housing, employment, and parental services for mothers. This is a project whose multiple meanings and purposes operate fluidly between giving vital responses to critical needs and offering a sophisticated interplay of stories and photographs. This documentation highlights the gaps between the work of maternal care and the societal lack of care for poor mothers and their children. In fact, Hopkins's introduction to the book takes the form of a subtle plea not to forget the countless mothers made destitute or worse by the policies of gender discrimination and the laws of culture that take for granted that the mother is most often the primary party responsible for her family's welfare. This project is deeply intersubjective in the political and poetic sense that Hopkins herself is a mother who raised her now-adult son on her own during his early years. She knows through her own experiences the vital necessity for this practical guidebook and its accompanying strategically coded and collaboratively produced photographs and texts.

When I first met Judith Hopkins she was wearing a button printed with the eloquent phrase, "Every mother is a working mother." We were at a photography conference where I was to present a paper. It was the first time I had been away from my one-year-old son. I left him with a fever in someone else's trusted care. Nonetheless, I was torn by what I felt was my maternal neglect and my passion for sharing my work. Reading the words on Hopkins's button at that moment, I felt immediately supported by their affirmation of the importance of all mothers' work yet bothered by their profuse acknowledgment that a woman is never let loose from her work as a mother. In *Stretching It*, Hopkins gives photographic and textual testimony to the experiences of countless mothers who could not surmount economic or psychological trials. She redresses those tragedies by intersubjectively representing feminist maternal actions that are transforming the legacy of cultural indifference toward mothers.

Lesbian mother-photographers are also powerfully transforming the legacy of indifference toward and invisibility of mothers who step outside traditional maternal sites. Some of these artists employ photographic portraiture, a genre that historically claimed to be inclusive and democratic while it was institutionally used as a socially regulating device.⁸ As a form of social regulation, the family portrait has traditionally mimicked the hierarchy

of the wealthy and the imitating desires of the middle class. In such portraits, the father as owner of his flock is usually seated ceremoniously in the middle of the portrait and his wife is seated next to him or stands by him, while their children are generally positioned surrounding him as embellishing symbols of his wealth and status. Less familiar in this mid-nineteenth-century genre were portraits of mothers and their children, unless they were mammy-and-child portraits. Such duplicitous and painful images erased the presence of the white mother and the reality of the slave's children, as well as the black woman's soul. I discuss this genre of portraiture in the next chapter.

Contemporary family portraiture by lesbian mother-artists decisively brings the mother back into the picture. In fact, the mother is often doubled in these cases. The portrait genre thus continues to be revitalized. Yet these mothers out of place risk double exposure. Are the artists appealing to conventional dictates in order to give their families the right and the honor of being pictured, or are they confounding the traditional genre of portraiture in the process of claiming identity and presence?

Partners and mother-artists Cheri Gaulke and Sue Maberry came up with a stunningly clever idea that trips up the simple notion of inclusion. As Gaulke put it, she and Maberry do not engage in the practice of exchanging family photographs, especially around the holidays, as do the other members of her family.⁹ Instead, they came up with the concept of using the preexisting, mass-produced, working-class format of the department store studio portrait. Gaulke and Maberry coyly brought the unsuspecting employees of the Sears department stores into their clandestine performance. They went to their local Sears with their seven-year-old neighbor and let themselves be positioned and photographed by an untrained "photographer." Whether completely unaware of the guise or choosing to will out of consciousness that the two women are lesbians, the young woman employee posed "the family" in a traditional patriarchal manner against their background of choice. She first positioned Maberry behind Gaulke and placed Maberry's arm around Gaulke for the photograph. Then the employee brought the girl into the frame for the next picture and addressed Maberry as "Mom." The two women realized that the Sears employee imagined Maberry as the grandmother and thus gave her the honored central space in this play on the family portrait. The same assumption occurred a few years later when Gaulke and Maberry, now mothers, took their two girls with them for another portrait experience at Sears. These artist-mothers coyly played with such ultraclichéd photographic conventions in order to knowingly expose the new model of family

that they, their children, and countless other families embody. But they did not stop with their family portrait. They invited friends from across the country to join their masquerade—lesbian and gay couples, heterosexual couples, single parents with children, and friends who wanted to pose together—by going to their local Sears to have their portraits taken against the limited and repetitive choices of backgrounds that mimic the restricted gender options in dominant culture. I deeply enjoy this concept of the dissemination of the mass-produced, serene-surfaced, and neutralized family portrait being turned around en masse to give out a distinctly different message.

Gaulke and Maberry then orchestrated these portraits to form the basis of their powerful installation *Thicker than Blood*, part of the exhibition *Communitas: The Feminist Art of Community Building*, curated by Betty Ann Brown and Elizabeth Say at the Art Galleries at California State University, Northridge, August 21–October 3, 1992. In this installation, the artists arranged the portraits of their friends that compose their family on a long and spacious gallery wall. The word “FAMILY” was spelled out in large white block letters that alternately jumped out from and faded into the light-colored gallery wall, depending on one’s position in relation to the lighting. Gaulke and Maberry placed the word “Lesbian” in smaller, handwritten type above “FAMILY” as a strong addition to and interruption of the traditional notion of singularity and uniformity.

Clever and deeply ironic, *Thicker than Blood* nonetheless touches on the pain and trauma experienced by many lesbian and gay families. I will never forget the anguish my former neighbors felt when they had to approach me to sign medical papers when one member of the couple was to be admitted to the hospital. A neighbor was considered more reliable, more legal than a friend or lover. A family member would have been best, but neither was considered family to each other by the terms of mainstream culture. In *Thicker than Blood*, Gaulke and Maberry address the trauma of rejection many lesbian and gay families experience from their “blood” families and turn this exclusion into new relations of love, caring, and intersubjectivity with others and their children.

Los Angeles–based photographer Catherine Opie’s splendid double portrait nursing her son Oliver, “Self-Portrait/Nursing” (2004), resists conventional classification. It is without question one of the most powerful and magnificent contemporary photographic images of mother and child. This is a genre scene that harkens back to centuries of Madonna and child images, yet the traditional airiness and grace of the Mother Mary in Opie’s double portrait become a grace of a wholly different kind. Opie holds her young son



Catherine Opie, "Self-Portrait/Nursing," 2004. C-print, 40 x 32 inches; ed. 8. Copyright Catherine Opie. Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

with a majestic circular motion, her strong arms and work-worn hands cradling him to her breast. She looks down at him with a gaze of maternal concern as he looks up at her, simultaneously taking in her milk. The creamy soft texture and milky white color of the mother's and child's skin merge in a gesture of awesome magnificence. The blackness of the mother's hair and the centeredness of her head against the sumptuous orange-and-gold drapery behind them highlight her bold strength. The child's light, soft hair creates a lovely counterpoint. The intricate arabesque and geometric designs of Opie's tattoos on her right upper arm and shoulder beautifully complement the textured designs on the backdrop, subtly referring to the splendor of the interconnectedness between mother and child. The intersubjectivity they share is holy and just, intimately and unquestionably belonging to the lesbian mother's maternal rights/rites.

These mamas out of place employ different forms of photographic portraiture, installation work, and text poetically and intersubjectively to provoke rhetorical autobiographical, cultural, and, ultimately, political stances. They bring home the connections and poignant contradictions among social clichés, lived maternal experiences, and their reconceived visual representations of feminist motherhood. They are proposing exhilarating new spaces for the maternal in visual culture and in life.

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Making the Maternal Visible

RENÉE COX'S FAMILY PORTRAITS

THE WOMAN IS PICTURED in a state of tenderness, solemnity, and service. She is graceful, stabilizing, foundational. Her name, however, remains unknown to us. "Slave" is the name they gave her. The label "Slave and Child," rather than "Woman and Child," places the woman in a subhuman category outside the normal interpersonal relations designated by the words "man, woman, and child." This woman's historical inscription of servitude survives in the photograph's contemporary caption. The young girl, too, swathed in all her white finery, goes unnamed. But "child" is an echo of the privilege, legitimacy, and sexuality this young girl would later carry. The slave holds the child: that's one way of putting it. The nurse-nanny carries her charge, this stilled young girl. Granting more mutual affection to this forced couple, we could call the photograph "Mammy and Child," as remarkable portraits such as this one are more commonly if not euphemistically named. Yet the word "mammy" gets closer to the maternal caress with which the woman encircles and protects the child. Her steady, graceful hands sway the girl into becoming the photograph's subject, while the mammy looks down and holds herself within the frame as its subjugated object. The girl's centrality is emphasized by the blinding whiteness and floating expansiveness of her dress, which contrasts sharply with the mammy's tight-fitting, grid-patterned garb that cloaks and imprisons

her. The woman's hands and face fade almost imperceptibly into the photographer's backdrop. Indeed, she is visible merely as background in this estranged domestic scene. The anonymous intimacy of this photographic setup scorches us with the devastating proportions of its legacy.¹

I am drawn to mammy-and-child portraits in part because of how powerfully feelings of tenderness and care accrue around such photographs that are themselves enveloped in the cruelest fiction of domestic bliss. Born into her role as enforced surrogate mother of her owner's white children, the slave as mother represents the severest form of oppression and servitude. If the figure of the mother in Western patriarchal culture already stands in for extreme passivity and devalued love, the mammy is the doubled icon of sacrifice.²

Mammy-and-child double portraits are perhaps the most complex and disturbing images from the antebellum period precisely because the women are pictured in the material presence and repressed evidence of their bondage. The woman-slave and the child are photographed seemingly worlds apart from the male arena of commerce and violence that are absent in the portrait yet propel them nevertheless. The mammy was the woman entrusted with the care of her master's most precious commodities, his children. Thus, such portraits initially functioned to honor the children pictured, and to bolster their father's and mother's status as well as the horrific patriarchy of slavery. In most cases, mammies were not permitted a legitimate biological family of their own, since it was believed that they would not be able to perform their "domestic duties" in addition to their own doubled maternal work. No wonder domesticity still rings with the echoes of slavery. More insidiously, beyond the mere political economy of the master-slave relationship, the recognition that the woman had a family of her own would have been too revolutionary because it would have granted her a human status. Thus her children, property in the slave owner's eyes, were as a rule wrenched from her and sold off like cattle.

We can only guess today that the tenderness these women gave to their owners' children was a complex and despairing blend of love and resistance. Their stories are largely silenced within the fetishized, locketlike daguerreotypes that contain their images.³ It is impossible to look at these portraits without wondering what psychic strategies the women created to survive the violence of their institutionalized lives and to summon the strength to maintain some form of autonomy over their owners' control. Toni Morrison's character Sethe in her novel *Beloved* comes to mind. Although she was not a mammy, Sethe was a slave who killed her own baby daughter in an act that was both desperate and monumentally brave. It saved her daughter from



Figure 4. R. G. MONTGOMERY
American, active 1840s Richmond, Virginia
Slave and Child, 1848
Sixth-plate daguerreotype. Jackie Napoleon Wilson Collection

R. G. Montgomery, "Slave and Child," 1848. Sixth-plate daguerreotype. Jackie Napoleon Wilson Collection. Photograph courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

the horrors of slavery that she herself endured.⁴ Even though slavery is abolished today, the psychic knots that keep racism alive have yet to be severed. Let's remember that in a wholly different contemporary infanticide case, Susan Smith conjured up a black "bogeyman" as her maternal alibi.⁵

Indeed, with the specter of the willful, to-be-tamed black male behind every image of his domesticated female other, it hardly seems possible that these tranquil "family" scenes could remain contained within their diminutive frames. Collected by the plantation owners as cherished mementos cloaked in greed and delusions of superiority, these coy memories of things past are plagued by posthumous questions. What kinds of tricky double meanings did such mammy-and-child portraits generate for the slave woman and how did they resonate differently for the slave owner, his wife, and their child(ren) as they grew up? What sorts of perversions and repressions did these startling images stand in for? If I allow myself a vulgar reading of the particular double portrait that opens this chapter, these questions are underlined when we consider the dark shape traced out in the foreground by the girl's foot. Embedded as it is in the girl's fluffy finery, it also appears to be the shape of a vulva as it mimes the place where the black woman's genitals would be.

The complex cultural and psychic meanings of such double portraits beg the very existence of the family photograph, which is usually taken for granted. However, when a people's family and cultural history is marked by violation, disruption, and erasure, no such recorded visual lineage or ownership of those memories can be assumed. Seemingly honorific family portraits taken before and during the Civil War bear out the familial tear in the legacy of African American history. This tear is most severe in family portraits in which the mammy is pictured. Indeed, mammy-and-child portraits reveal the ideological fissures in traditional notions of sentimentality and domesticity, the very notions that have upheld the supposed serene surface of family photographs. Few family portraits in the history of photography bear such potent witness to the double lie of domesticity, ownership, and the maternal.

Renée Cox's "Yo Mama" mother-and-child portrait (1993), part of the larger photographic series by this Jamaican-born and Scarsdale, New York-raised artist, radically transforms the pictorial legacy of slavery and maternity. Working against both the historical imprisonments of black women and the patriarchal clichés of mothers as self-enclosed and passive, Cox offers a complex representation that is at once bold and contemplative. Her black body emerges from the Rembrandtesque darkness behind her, while she holds her infant son's lighter body in a gesture that ambivalently offers



Renée Cox, "Yo Mama," 1993. Gelatin silver print, 85 x 49 inches. Copyright Renée Cox. Courtesy of the Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

him to the world and protects him. His dark hair merges with the blackness of infinity that envelopes him, as he stands out against his maternal bearer. The oscillation in Cox's hold on her son is reflected in the ambiguous relationship set up between her piercing expression and her frontal nude self-representation. Her gaze is focused down at the viewer: menacing, taunting, daunting. Yet, contradicting her bold projection of self, her look seems reserved, almost sad. Cox's ambivalent expression challenges the viewer to survey her Superwoman nakedness, which merges androgynous sensuality with distinctly feminine signs of sexuality. The provocative black high heels she wears seem an organic part of her statuesque power. The viewer may need several encounters with this complex photograph to reconcile its dramatically unconventional and seemingly contradictory projections of woman as mother. This is hardly a traditional Madonna-and-child image from the long repertoire of Western art and cultural history. This is a genre scene of a wholly different kind—a photograph of a mother and child out of place. Indeed, this double portrait is a heightened scene from contemporary everyday life in the process of birthing new images of mothers by choice, of black mothers breaching new possibilities for merging maternity, sexuality, and work.

The photograph is huge in stature, measuring in at more than seven feet high. Cox also elaborately framed her family portrait, granting it the status of a precious and valued heirloom. Her control of the image, both within it as implacable presence and outside it through the caress of embellishment on its frame, signals confidence in proper ownership and the trust in future generations that is implied in the passing down of an heirloom. By dramatically enlarging the scale of the traditional family portrait and wedding its physical power with its strategic adornment, Cox issues a call and response back to the small, jewel-like mammy-and-child daguerreotype portraits. Her contemporary portrait explodes the myth of domestic bliss embedded in the mismatched nineteenth-century “family” portraits and bestows on black mothers renewed value and respect. Cox's redefined family portrait is monumental not only in its scale but also in its historical proportions. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, well over one hundred years since the abolition of slavery plus five decades since the onset of the civil rights movement, it is still no easy task to create images that work against mutual exclusivities and open up the conception of black women as sexual and as mothers on their own terms. Let alone to live these complexities without taboo. Through her vigilance, Cox's “Yo Mama” works against keeping the figure of the mother in her assigned place.

“You're what?” was the response Cox received from many of her fellow

students at the Whitney Museum of American Art Graduate Studies Program in New York City when she shared the news of her second pregnancy. Cox was the first woman in the program within a quarter of a century to become a mother. It was as if pregnancy were a disease in the art world, a disease that rots our all-too-female bodies and extracts energy from our wannabe male creative minds.

One wonders therefore whether, albeit unconsciously, restrictive perceptions of motherhood were not also working in tandem with racism in the responses to Cox's pregnancy announcement. As feminist legal scholar Patricia J. Williams puts it:

Most Americans still believe that blacks are having more than their fair share of babies, that blacks account for more welfare recipients . . . that women have babies on purpose, just to get welfare checks. . . . Blacks, even black children, are treated at every level like an abomination against nature, a mistake in the scheme of things, a deviance denied in hyperdefensive, warring terms.⁶

Cox's "Yo Mama" photographic response to such limited thinking and repressive stereotyping brings to mind former slave, mother of four (three of whom were sold off into slavery), and abolitionist Sojourner Truth's eloquent challenge. A gifted speaker with a powerful public presence, Truth was often heckled by her audiences, who sometimes threw eggs and stones at her. Small children even taunted her, calling her "nigger witch." In one infamous case, using the excuse of her tall stature and deep voice, her audience tried to silence her by accusing her of being a man disguised as a woman. She riveted her audience by baring her breast, declaring, "It is not my shame but yours that I do this." Soon after, in 1852, in another case of protest against her, Truth was finally allowed to address a women's rights meeting in Akron, Ohio. Incorporating her previous audience's attempt to degrade her into a strategic defiance, this time Truth countered her taunters with the now-famous line, "Ain't I a woman?"⁷

Cox's "Yo Mama, the Statue" (1993) is another powerful contemporary reverberation of Truth's brilliant double-edged response to the censoring of her race and sexuality. In this case, Cox's sculpture and photographs were directed not toward an antagonistic stranger but toward an intimate relation. During the advanced stages of her pregnancy, Cox's husband told her he was not attracted to her and declined her sexual invitations.⁸ For many women, this denial of our erotic pregnant selves by the men who made it happen is like spiritual rape. One private incident of punishment by refusal—the pregnant woman was acting out of place—signals the larger patriarchal repression of maternal erotics and desire. Cox took the intimate

into the public arena and responded to the censoring of her sensuality by making a white plaster cast from her own pregnant body, which she then incorporated into several double self-portraits. One is especially arresting. It merges a stable, calm defiance directed outward with a tenderness that wraps around the self. Cox subtly leans the weight of her black pregnant body against the resolute white cast. The gesture seems to ask for protection, to shield her and her anticipated baby. Her own left hand rests on her pregnant body in a casual caress. As if to complete the other part of herself, the right arm of the white cast is raised with its hand resting self-assuredly at the hip. The effectiveness of Cox's interplay between autobiography and history, private and public taboos and their filtered photographic representation again strikes deep. This image recalls the words of Xuela, given voice by Jamaica Kincaid in her remarkable novel *The Autobiography of My Mother*:

My human form and odor were an opportunity to heap scorn on me. I responded in a fashion by now characteristic of me: whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most . . . I observed and beheld myself; the invisible current went out and it came back to me. I came to love myself out of defiance.⁹

This unusual declaration of self-love was born out of the Carib woman's experience of being treated as an outcast in her own land and within her own family. The white cast of Cox's sculpture eerily alludes to the figure of her white French husband. It also resonates as Cox's own ghost image of herself. When the work itself is on exhibition it is accompanied by an audio-tape on which the artist's voice is heard before one enters the installation where the sculpture stands. Cox intones, alternately sexy and outraged, "So baby, do you want to fuck tonight?" and "Don't fuck with me."

Cox's provocative and ironic *Yo Mama* family portraits, like Sojourner Truth's sensible acts of defiance before them, are directed against the mutual exclusivities that separate women's sexuality from motherhood and, in turn, maternal eroticism from power.

Yet for all their self-assurance, strength, and dignity, Cox's self-portraits showing her nude black body with and without her son(s) still conjure up the trauma of slavery and the devastation it wrought on women's bodies and souls. Precisely through the contrast of her direct and eloquent self-presentation against the abyss of black women's histories, Cox's remarkable portraits bring into full evidence the denials slavery brought to bear on the black female body—denials that disallowed women their legitimate motherhood, rightful property, and self-owned sexuality. In their reigning poise, Cox's photographs sound an echo back to clothed maternal bodies of mummies in no position to show off the power of their maternal rights or sexuality. That was reserved



Renée Cox, "Yo Mama, the Statue," 1993. Gelatin silver print, 85 x 49 inches. Copyright Renée Cox. Courtesy of the Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

for their owners' private pleasures, which went largely undocumented. As one art critic aptly put it, "*Yo' Mama* is an ironic dig at society's rending of the female parent into madonna and whore."¹⁰ I would add that this splitting is especially impaling for black mothers, who are always already further devalued and exoticized within the patriarchal paradox embedded in its own fear of the power within female/maternal bodies.

The woman pictured in the nineteenth-century "Slave and Child" portrait had no choice about the label given to her. Yet Cox deliberately titled her series *Yo Mama* after a name her own son, at age five, called her. "That line comes from my life," says Cox. "My kid said that to me, and my kid comes from a loving, racially mixed home where blackness is appreciated . . . That disrespect is not coming from my house—it comes from society at large."¹¹

“Yo Mama” tautly addresses the phenomenon of derogatory naming from within as well as from without. Let’s revisit the manner in which the mother holds her two-year-old son. Her pose is a highly unconventional depiction of mother and child. Cox’s son is not merged vertically with the mother’s body, nor is he engulfed by the maternal caress. Rather, he is pictured as emerging from the mother’s sexuality, at once a part of her and distinct, almost distant. However, the mother’s seemingly cool relationship to her child reveals another layer of intersubjectivities between them. Rather than posing Madonna-like with the child on her breast, Cox reveals hers in a gesture that frees her son from becoming the target of frontal harm. Her body is bared so that he can remain, as his exuberant face attests, in a carefree and playful state of innocence. It is no wonder that Cox holds her infant son’s lighter black body in a gesture that ambivalently offers him to the world and simultaneously protects him. Consider the traditional Madonna and child representations, which embody the figure of Mary as an unequivocal safety zone for the holy child. The countless blissful faces of Mary peering out at us from beneficent landscapes over the centuries seem to smugly ask, “What insurance do I need when I’ve got the Catholic Church behind me?” Cox’s representation of the black mother stands up for herself and her sacred son. I hear Billie Holiday imploring, “God bless the child that’s got his own.”

Cox’s hold on her son and her photographic projection of him into the world triggered a wide-ranging comment that likened him to a gun—and not just any gun, but an Uzi. Sadly, as Audre Lorde wrote earlier, black women must raise their sons like warriors. But the embattled, militaristic interpretation of “Yo Mama,” which was printed on a wall label at the Bad Girls exhibition in 1994 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, turns the child into the object of aggression. Among the complex implications of this characterization, it denies any human relation between the mother and child. Indeed, likening the young boy’s body to a lethal weapon is to load onto his innocent, pliant, as-yet-unformed being the larger cultural paranoia surrounding the adult male black body. Why not read this image, instead, on a more intimate and intersubjective level? In this way, one could see the mother’s hold on her child as a representation of everyday maternal care inseparable from her concerns for her child in society—especially doubled for the mother of a black boy—composed of burden, fear, love, responsibility, and reward. Indeed, the way Cox holds her son in this resonant photograph implies the mother’s uneasy bearing of a trophy, as it takes on lived meaning as an emblem of pride, a gift of love, an ode to success and survival.

The trouble is that Cox's emphatically mimetic photographic representation of her and her son's bodies rings so many cultural bells . . . or does it pull triggers? Yet, Cox's self-photographed body in full evidence is hardly a transparent, facilely legible, or universalized body surface. Her photographic icons rely on the visibility of her naked body, but they are distanced from other publicized artistic exposures of the naked pregnant body, such as the generalized and essentialized symbolism of Judy Chicago's images from the *Birth Project* (1980), as well as from the coy photographic realism employed by Annie Leibovitz in the infamous portrait of Demi Moore from the August 1991 cover of *Vanity Fair* magazine. The potent history of the representation of the female body in feminist art in the late twentieth century, especially in photography, is laden with unease and constant renegotiations between the physical body and the larger institutional bodies that constitute the very meanings of a woman's self-representation.¹² Paramount in this history are strategies directed toward asserting that the female body will not be open for violation. Much cogent feminist writing and photographic practice during the 1970s articulated the necessity for women to refuse the representation of their bodies as target sites for the patriarchal scopic gaze. These stances, as in Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* and Susan Hiller's *Ten Months*, powerfully underscored the importance of rejecting easily exploitable depictions of women's and mothers' bodies. Adhering too closely to such approaches, however, now could restrict the fruitful possibilities of employing the seemingly evident body as a means to create dialogue between painful stereotypes and the complexities such images may reveal about women's lived experiences. Thus, it seems to me that Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*—strategically detached from any visually mimetic representation of motherhood (except for the fascinating frontispiece photograph)—and Cox's *Yo Mama* photographs, with bodies in evidence, are not so distant from each other. Both reconfigured family portraits assert that the woman's body in evidence is not enough; her cultural traces and lived experiences must also be legible.¹³

Two crucial if obvious differences in Kelly's and Cox's representations of the maternal body, however, are that Cox's is black and naked. The cultural taboo against picturing motherhood in its lived realities is doubled by the historical censorship of black women, a censorship that is itself belied by the exposed and eroticized black body, what art historian Lisa Gail Collins astutely calls the "enforced overexposure of black women's bodies."¹⁴ So for every image of the mammy as Madonna in proper dress and pose for the camera there lurk more debased and equally public images of the woman

slave made dirty and exhausted from working in the field, being exhibited on the auction block, or being raped by her owner. No contemporary image of a naked black woman, even if produced by the woman herself, goes unaccompanied by the shadow of violences from the recent past. Such devaluations cannot be easily erased by willing them away, although turning the violent gaze of others' hatred into images of self-respect and love is a fruitful if difficult approach. Veiling women's bodies to ward off disrespect and exploitation was a dominant strategy for white feminist artists in the past few decades, followed by more recent strategies that focus on picturing desire, visibility, and sensuality on our own terms. Yet these redefined visibilities represented through the foil of women's bodies take on more troubled and complex renegotiations as black women face the contradictions of their own liberated visions of themselves.

The visible, emphatic nakedness of Cox's body and her variously forceful, pensive, almost pleading facial expressions in the "seeness" of her *Yo Mama* photographs make explicit the multiple dilemmas in this vulnerable visibility. Art and cultural critic bell hooks also confronts this doubled trap of vulnerability and emancipation in making black seeing bodies visible:

Living in white-supremacist culture, we mostly see images of black folks that reinforce and perpetuate the accepted, desired subjugation and subordination of black bodies by white bodies. Resisting these images, some black folks learn early in life to divert our gaze, much in the same way that we might shield a blow to the body. We shield our minds and imaginations by changing positions, by blocking the path, by simply turning away, by closing our eyes.¹⁵

Shielding and veiling black women's and men's bodies, minds, and souls is a sensible survival strategy against others' attempts at dehumanizing them. Informed by contemporary feminist art strategies, the power of self-portraiture, and, above all, her own experiences of blackness and motherhood, Cox refuses to turn her gaze away. Confronting others with her steadfast gaze against the force of their desire to make her and her sons invisible will not will away their hatred, but Cox's *Yo Mama* photographs seem to say that is the only stance she can take. In her work to unearth and re-form the racist foundations of property law, Patricia J. Williams also imagines new ways for blacks to own and envision themselves. Particularly in her powerful and poetic essay "On Being the Object of Property," interestingly under the subheading "On Being Invisible," Williams writes about the dilemmas of being looked at derogatorily and, like Cox, finds power and clarity in allowing herself to look out from under the paralyzing gazes of others:

My parents were always telling me to look up at the world; to look straight at people, particularly white people; not to let them stare me down; to hold my ground; to insist on the right to my presence no matter what. They told me that in this culture you have to look people in the eye because that's how you tell them you're their equal. . . . What was hardest was not just that white people saw me . . . but that they looked through me, that they treated me as though I were transparent.

By itself, seeing into me would be to see my substance, my anger, my vulnerability, and my wild raging despair . . .

To look is also to make myself vulnerable; yet not to look is to neutralize the part of myself which is vulnerable. I look in order to see, and so I must look. Without that directness of vision, I am afraid I will will my own blindness, disinherit my own creativity, and sterilize my own perspective of its embattled, passionate insight.¹⁶

In harmony with hooks's concept of shielding and protection and Williams's reflections on visibility, I see Cox's revolutionary family portraits of black bodies in evidence not as mere transparencies of vision but as incantatory provocations for black women and mothers to let themselves be seen, and by being seen, to look back and out.

Cox's *Yo Mama* photographs thus disrupt the serene surface of family portraiture in order to reveal the multiple paradoxes between the seen and the obscene. In one literal spewing of obscenities, Cox received the following "response" to the "Yo Mama" photograph after it was exhibited at the de-Compression Gallery and published in an alternative magazine in Tempe, Arizona. An unidentified male called the gallery, ranting, "What's this nigger bitch doing in this magazine?"¹⁷

This idiotic racist rambling gives new meaning to the sorely misused phrase "in your face," often meant to obscure powerful visual depictions of cultural taboos that merit being faced. Cox's courageous and exquisite self-representations and family portraits challenge us to envision black female bodies as new terrain for expanding black maternal visibility, for giving evidence of the tremendous strength involved in vulnerability and caring.

The back-and-forth tension in this discussion between historical inscriptions of violence and contemporary images of liberation is meant to underscore that the new body of possibilities Cox's photographs embrace also simultaneously traces decades of resistances. The reparations they seek for black women echo in June Jordan's remarkable poem "Gettin Down to Get Over," which she dedicated to her mother. Like Cox's photographic

incantations, this poem brings us into a journey of historical cruelty, cultural renegotiations, and psychic calls to face black mothers anew:

MOMMA MOMMA MOMMA

momma momma

mammy

nanny

granny

woman

mistress

sista

luv

blackgirl

slavegirl

gal

honeychile

sweetstuff

sugar

sweetheart

baby

Baby Baby

MOMMA MOMMA

Black Momma

Black bitch

Black pussy

piecea tail

nice piecea ass

.....

the infant fingers gingerly

approach caress the

soft/Black/swollen/momma breast

and there

inside the mommasoft

life-spillin treasure chest

the heart

breaks

.....

teach me to survive my

momma

teach me how to hold a new life
momma
help me
turn the face of history
to your face.

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Loving in Difference

NGOZI ONWURAH'S MOTHER-DAUGHTER REFLECTIONS

To a world that sees only in black and white,
I was made only in the image of my father.
Yet . . . she lives inside me and cannot be separated.
I may not be reflected in her image but my mother
is mirrored in my soul.

—NGOZI ONWURAH, *The Body Beautiful*

NGOZI ONWURAH'S remarkably powerful and poignant film *The Body Beautiful* (1991; twenty three minutes) makes boldly visible the intense conflicts and deepening love in a British Nigerian daughter's changing and transformative relationship with her white British mother.¹ Onwurah's loving merging of visible differences into the intimacies of a particular mother-daughter relationship takes place in the face of patriarchal value systems that divide women into those who are desired and those who are scorned. *The Body Beautiful* is life affirming in its exploration of healing the cruel schisms that have severed the power and passion of mother-daughter intersubjectivities. This film takes into account the debilitating effects as well as the possibilities for love that result in the daughter's and the mother's abilities to confront generational differences, limited ideas of feminine beauty, illness, and racism.²

The last stunning passage in this beautifully unfolding and nonlinear story reveals the heart of the women's intertwined narratives. As the denouement in a series of deeply interwoven fictionalizations of events and memories, the daughter creates for the viewer a devastatingly powerful and tender fantasy realm in which the mother imagines a young African British man

making love to her, perhaps standing in for her absent Nigerian husband. This scene takes place at the same time as the daughter, a budding fashion model, is directed during a photo shoot to look as though she is having sex. Their distinct expressions of pleasure slowly merge on the screen—the daughter’s contrived, the mother’s tangible—culminating in the daughter’s outrage, a cry of protection, perhaps jealously as she screams out, “Don’t touch her!” a plea that is also audible as an affirmation of her mother’s sexuality, “Touch her!” The scene resumes a quiet hush as the daughter slowly undresses, enters her mother’s bed that now replaces the fantasy one where the lover had been, and the two women embrace. With her head resting visibly on her mother’s breast, the site of her mastectomy, the daughter softly intones:

To a world that sees only in black and white, I was made only in the image of my father. Yet she has molded me, created the curves and contours of my life, colored the innermost details of my being . . . She lives inside me and cannot be separated. I may not be reflected in her image but my mother is mirrored in my soul. I am my mother’s daughter for the rest of my life.

When I wrote earlier that this film is a healing exploration, I meant it in the deep literal sense of the word “exploration,” “to cry out” or “to weep.” In the afterbirth of watching *The Body Beautiful*, I feel my own sorrows and sources of life. I am caught between two bodies: the daughter’s fluid, lithe one of young womanhood and the awkward yet calm body of the mother. In actual years I know I am closer to the mother, but my perception of myself does not always match my own changing body—the public presentation of self that my body gives outside of me. And yet the gap closes in ever faster between my body and my mother’s; two generations of stories begin to overlap between my mother’s life and my own, stories about cancers, mastectomies, and a myriad of other illnesses. “Mommy, comfort me,” I hear myself say as I rub my mother’s hot forehead with a cold washcloth as she lies outstretched in her bed in the intensive care unit. I’m not used to being the tending one, even though I lavish tenderness on my own child, your grandson. My grandmother’s fleshiness, surprisingly cool and fresh, encompasses me as I rail against the movie we’ve just watched together on television somewhere around the year 1965. I think it was *One Potato, Two Potato* (1964). The film’s closing scene shows the young daughter of a white divorcée who is newly married to a black man who was not allowed custody of his stepdaughter. The girl is being driven away from them as she looks out the back window of the car that with each second divorces her implacably, cruelly, and illogically from her family. Strange that some of my earliest



Ngozi Onwurah, *The Body Beautiful*, 1991. Film still courtesy of Women Make Movies, www.wmm.com.

memories of racism and representations of separation merge with more recent dislocations, as they are each encoded within the comfort, vulnerability, and strength of maternal bodies.

Through the mending force of its interplay between intimate memories, projected desires, and cultural history, *The Body Beautiful* fluidly elicited psychic clips from my own life. The enormous power of this poignant film resides in part in its ability to take the viewer outside herself and bring her back into a transformed and reflective space within herself. In addition, this “outside herself” is worlds apart from traditional film narratives that separate the self from itself by directing the spectator’s focus into the actions and gazes of a dominating character within the film. In the culmination of *The Body Beautiful*, neither mother nor daughter dominates the other. This subtle and bold film thus pivots around a stunning series of differences—traditional and reexplored expectations of beauty and the dichotomies among race, age, and illness—paradoxically played out through the mother and the daughter’s intersubjectivities. Onwurah as daughter and filmmaker guides us through her memories of her child self to young womanhood as she remembers her mother’s vulnerabilities, her own embarrassments, and the intense love, as well as the tensions between her plain-looking white British mother and her own visibly elegant black self. In contrast with June Jordan’s plea to have black mothers respected, which Renée Cox’s photographs powerfully exemplify, the black daughter in *The Body Beautiful* cruelly turns the tables on her white mother, claiming superiority through her youth and “model” beauty. Yet what is crucial is that the film moves beyond the daughter’s selfishness into a tale of mutual love between the mother and the daughter. *The Body Beautiful* eventually leads the viewer to the daughter’s realization of her mother’s remarkable psychic strength and her own sense of womanhood.

The film’s central metaphors of conflict, intersubjectivity, and new conceptions of the maternal psychic body are constructed through an ingenious interplay among memory, fantasy, and actuality. *The Body Beautiful* merges a creative reworking of the narrative documentary style with a courageous and strategic use of autobiography—the mother is Onwurah’s real mother in the film. The doubled truth or verité in this subjective documentary helps bring into representation deep cultural taboos that are brought to bear on the body of the “disfigured” woman, doubly discounted and desexualized if she is a mother. Onwurah’s approaches to autobiography and documentary filmmaking are deeply invested in challenging a patriarchal structure of knowing and seeing. In this chapter I explore *The Body Beautiful* in terms of the unique structure Onwurah has created to reach into the rawness of feel-

ing, the ethics of care, and the depths of maternal narrative in her remarkable testament to her own real-life mother, Madge Onwurah.

The mother's and the daughter's separate and mutual desires are given rich texture through the representation of voice in the film. "Voice" in this context refers both to the acknowledgment of previous devaluations and the enunciation of uncovered stories, as well as to the literal use of voices and silences. The film's point of view is largely told through the daughter's retrospective frame, yet she brings in her memories of and desires for her mother through the actuality of Madge's own voice. Interestingly, the two women rarely speak directly to each other as in the relay of traditional dialogue. Instead, the voice-over is used to stage and reenact memories and fantasies of their transforming relationship. When the mother or daughter speaks directly using her voice, it creates a jolting disruption in their interior musings and critical reflections. Recall the daughter yelling at her mother's imagined lover at the end of the film, enjoining him to touch and not to touch her mother as her words put an end to her mother's fantasy. Another such violent rupture occurs in the film's opening shot, in which the teenage daughter stands rebelliously at the top of a stairwell, dominating her mother's smaller figure below. Her voice cuts through the unrelenting, haunting calm of the background music score, wounding her mother through her taunting words, "You titless cow."

Both of these audible dislocations represent the daughter's teenage dependency on and resistance to her mother's authority, framed through her unwillful desire to kill the mother, or at least the mother's spirit. These are scenes in the staging of a particular mother–daughter relationship. They do not necessarily signal the typical Freudian scenario, in which the daughter's rejection of the mother and her eventual begrudging acceptance of the mother's supposed submission to the rule of the father create her own cliché of woman. Onwurah begins her film with the adolescent daughter's testing her own and her mother's limits, creating an influx frame on which to note the daughter's development necessary to the connection and transformation of the mother–daughter bond that forms the deep matter of the film.

Similar to the passages that compose the film's ending, the emotionally frantic opening is transformed into more hushed and slowed-down scenes as the film unfolds into a series of reenacted memories narrated by the now grown-up daughter and her mother. These flashbacks commence with the adult daughter recounting through voice-over her brother's birth, coupled indelibly in her mind with her mother's breast cancer and the mastectomy immediately following her sibling's birth. As the daughter's voice solemnly remembers, the visual screen shows the young girl, perhaps six or seven years

old, visiting her mother in the hospital. We see intensely moving scenes of the two of them silently holding each other, gazing at each other in a timeless and protected space, keeping calm and strong for the other. These beautiful scenes of intersubjectivity between mother and daughter are interwoven with other scenes of traumatic dislocations, such as when Madge is rushed down a cold and frightening hospital hallway, a vial of blood breaking in her wake. We also hear the mother's interior voice. She is shown in her hospital room, alone, as she recounts somber stories of desolation and sacrifice: her separation from her husband through the turmoil of Nigeria's civil war; her need to ignore the cancer in her body lest it endanger the delivery of her child; the callousness of the medical institution toward her body and personhood as she remembers the idiotic and hurtful words of her doctor: "You are not the only woman who has ever gone through this." Thus the figure of the mother opens the film as the emblem of sacrifice, a tripled icon through the birth of her son, the absence of the father, and her own bodily loss.

At this point in my account of the film, the story might sound like a classic case of female victimhood or religious sacrifice, reinforced by the transposition of pain and sorrow onto the body of the mother. Indeed, traditional patriarchal stories of "the good mother" figure her through acceptable allegories steeped in her ultimate giving to and sacrifice for her child, from religious tales of the Mother Mary to more modern woes of those "better" mothers who valiantly give up good financial earning power to stay at home with their child(ren). Even in our recent stories from philosophy and cultural theory, the paradigm of the mother is often unwittingly coupled with the notion of the "ultimate good," even with the general idea of ethics itself. For example, feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz interprets philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's idea of ethics as a response to the recognition of the primacy of alterity—the giving up of the self—over one's own identity. As she considers Levinas's ideas, ethics is that field defined by the other's need, the other's calling for a response. Grosz adds that "the paradigm of an ethical relation is that of a mother's response to the needs or requirements of a child."³

Onruwah's film admits to this traditional if not impossible notion of motherhood defined through the ethics of the mother's lack of selfhood, insidiously bonded with patriarchal concepts of victimhood. The fact that we know the story is staged and framed by the daughter herself might lead to the conclusion that the mother's redemption, her transformation from victim to active agent or even to sainthood, is possible only through the eyes of her daughter. Perhaps the mother becomes a superwoman outside the domestic realm, leading to all kinds of social and sexual victories. Onwurah's

film does not take such exalted paths, both paths of least psychic resistance. She makes no such grandiose assumptions about or demands on her mother. The strength of the film lies in its groundedness in the difficult, mundane victories of the everyday and in the daughter's painstakingly realized wins and losses toward maturity. The mother's and the daughter's voiced and unvoiced stories explored in the film's early scenes reveal some of the deep sources of the mother's sorrows. The daughter eventually ceases to judge and devalue; she enacts a testimony that is brought to recognition through Madge's staged reliving of memories. Through the difficult and tenuous act of remembering, the daughter listens to her mother's stories. This listening forms a bridge between them, allowing the mother's memories to be heard again, recounted, and taken into account. The film thus gives Madge one of the deepest forms of respect as a mother: the witnessing, recognition, and translation of her maternal joys and sacrifices.

Onwurah also recognizes the insidious trap of devaluations in which her mother is caught and how motherhood for Madge is paradoxically if not perversely empowering. For example, a scene that follows soon after the series of shots in the hospital figures Madge at the playground watching her children with pride. Yet through her gestures and looks, we are made stingingly aware that a nearby man who plays with his dog does not notice her. We hear Madge's voice-over: "Men belonged to another life. Children were my shield, protecting me from rejection and disgust, but most of all, protecting me from pity." The mother's critical reflections both resist and give in to male-inflected expectations of female beauty and sexuality. Through the everyday labors of a strong and loving woman, we are made aware that cultural limits are exceedingly difficult to cast off. In one of the film's most wrenching admissions, Madge says, "Somewhere between the rheumatism and the mastectomy, I had been muted." However, the crucial difference between inevitable victimhood and moving beyond limits is in the way the mother's stories are told. The strength of Madge's own voice and her actual presence in *The Body Beautiful* challenge generations of encoded devaluations of women's/mothers' supposed passivity and acquiescence. The film's construction of ruptures in these stereotypical limitations is especially effective in a scene toward the film's ending in which the camera moves slowly around the walls of what looks like Madge's bedroom or study. She takes a journal from the shelf and writes in it. We hear her voice-over: "But my life, as I had defined it, was full. I had dignity. I lived my life and my children lived theirs." Madge views herself through an honest and stark perspective in which both her vulnerabilities and her independence are expressed with the same solidity and studied care that her body conveys. Onwurah's tribute

to her mother is at once the daughter's story and Madge's own account of her motherhood and womanhood. Thus, this tale of alterity—the act of giving from the one in need—is partly about maternal sacrifice, yet it does not rest its case solely on “the mother's lack of selfhood.”

Alterity in Emmanuel Levinas's conception of identity is based on the giving up of the self in order to give to another. Interestingly, he also invests the one in need with a position of strength in his or her vulnerability. According to Levinas, the vulnerable one holds the promise of calling for another's response. Through what he calls the other's “appeal,” a forceful demand is made on the giver to open the tense and implacable space between self and other.⁴ In mother–child relations, the child would seem to be the one in need. However, if we take mother–child relations into the realm of other human relationship possibilities, the notion of giving and caring can be extended to other crucial interconnections. If we stay within the mother–child bond and imagine the mother who is able to relinquish some of her burdens and responsibilities, the mother who can ask to be cared for, a new form of the maternal is at stake and a revolutionary notion of love and giving might be born.

A crucial scene in *The Body Beautiful* insinuates such a possibility of the mother's need transformed into the strength of interdependence. Madge's children wash and rinse their mother's hair, a chore turned into a luxury because Madge can no longer endure the pain of undertaking this task herself. This is an intensely brave and tender scene, mixed with bittersweet humor as the children use too much water and too much force. Mother, daughter, and son are remarkably comfortable together in the intertwining of their naked bodies. A scene of such stark and everyday beauty involving a mother and her child(ren) is rare in filmmaking, let alone in the larger realms of visual representation and culture.⁵ Beauty in this scene is the metaphor of the mother giving her children the gift of caring for her and thus the example of caring for others. This beauty is a form of love that offers a different foundation for relationship other than the phallogocentric, individualistic humanism that has shaped far too many cultural paradigms.

“Mommy, would you still love me if I wasn't pretty?” I asked in my ten-year-old innocence during my bath as my mother rubbed my back with a warm washcloth. I remember her looking at me thoughtfully and responding, “Beauty is not what you show on the outside. It's what you have inside. It's how you treat other people and what you give to them. Ugly is being mean to other people and hurting them. Ugly is hurting yourself. You, my *shana punim* [in Yiddish, “sweet-faced and sweet-souled”] daughter, you are beautiful.”

Onwurah's bath scene inspired the memory of mine in its extraordinary intimacy, naturalness, and ease. This scene stands in stark contrast with a closely following one in which Onwurah has staged a tense scenario full of pathos picturing Madge and her daughter in a sauna with several other women of mixed ages. The daughter has repeatedly tried to convince her mother not to be "a prude" and to partake of the pleasures of a sauna. Madge finally gives in. In close-up scenes of their faces, mother and daughter exchange looks of delight as each of them moves into her own experience. Madge's relaxation and abandon lead to her loosening grip on her towel, exposing the site of her mastectomy. The camera stays fixed on Madge's body and face until she awakes and becomes aware of her disclosure, her daughter's embarrassment and concern for her, and the discomfort this sight causes the other women as they look and then look away. Depending on our own experiences and those of the women we love, this scene asks the demanding question whether we, too, look away. The daughter's voice-over reinforces this question through her own revelation: "I remember that day in the sauna was the first time I saw my mother as a woman. I was forced to see her as others might." Indeed, the camera's slow, semicircular movement, starting from Madge and circulating around the enclosed space of the sauna, leaves open the suggestion of the film viewer's positionality. Such an open-ended use of the filmic framing refuses any singular or fixed gaze, which opens up the possibility that we, as spectators, not only look at Madge, we might be brought into an enactment of empathy with her and move into our own self-reflections. That we are so powerfully brought into this relay of identifications is all the more remarkable when we recall that this scene is sustained through Madge's own tensions between raw yet weathered vulnerability and the thin filter of acting that she brings to the scene through her own lived experiences. Through this critical perspective, Onwurah's challenging film provokes new ways of looking, feeling, and knowing.

The sauna scene conveys a strong realism, although it is filtered by the dreamy and haunting music that creates a softness and a harboring for the harshness of this film passage. The following lovemaking scene between Madge and her imagined lover is also a complex combination of realism and fantasy, although its elaborate staging makes it appear to exist in the realm of illusion. These two tense scenes are bridged by a moment of release in which mother and daughter are no longer the focus. We follow their gazes as they watch a group of young men playing pool. Madge's gaze is met and returned by one of them, and it is through his desiring look that this everyday scene is transformed into the heightened scene of lovemaking. Gauzy curtains and oversized candles make the setting appear melodramatic and

baroque. These trite and overplayed symbols of romance seem to be staged as a parallel to what might initially appear as an awkward and unlikely pair of lovers. However, as they embrace each other with passion and tenderness, the scene becomes remarkably believable and normalized. Indeed, as Madge's voice-over recounts her desire, "I wanted him for his very ordinariness, his outrageous normality." As the viewer hears Madge's words, the camera focuses first on her white hand on his dark back, and then on his hand on her back. The contrast of their skin color is an encompassing metaphor for the interplay and merging of differences at the core of the film. As the young black man brings her pleasure and caresses her breast, the scene achieves an emotional depth and intimacy that is almost unbearable. This scene's clichéd setting verging on kitsch allows a foil for this intensity, bringing to the surface the taboo of picturing both the aftermath of breast cancer and the forbidden fantasy of a mother's sexuality.

This critical scene is then interrupted by the daughter's scream/plea that I described earlier, a sound that moves the viewer to the final scene. This last scene pictures the mother and daughter's utterly tender and mutually accepting embrace. The camera travels around the naked couple, the daughter's head resting on her mother's breast, as it slowly shifts to a view from above, then moves in closer. This love scene, a scene of love between mother and child, between woman and woman, is extraordinary. Its rawness, tenderness, and power erase conflict between mother and daughter and challenge the tired story of their supposed double lack. The embracing camera movement in this scene allows the viewer memories of her own intimate passages from one's self to another and back to the self, through the merging of bodies and then through their visual differences and inevitable distances. This particularly strong scene and the film as a whole elaborate the healing force of intersubjectivities, the complex and mysterious places between one subject and the other. *The Body Beautiful* courageously opens up such spaces of merging and sameness, which, in any intimate relation, we know, are often sharply broken by tensions and confusions between where one person's sense of self begins and where it is projected onto and sometimes trampled upon by the other, lover, child, or mother. In the psychic arena where boundaries between mother and child, especially a daughter, fluctuate between intense intimacy and painful separation, as well as the possibilities of compromise, interracial intersubjectivities dramatize the heightened emotional and political stakes in maternal relations of sameness and difference. Patricia J. Williams uses the mother-child paradigm as a metaphor for imagining new cultural relations of alterity in an image that is strikingly close to Onwurah's in the closing scene of *The Body Beautiful*:

The image of a white woman suckling a black child; the image of a black child sucking for its life from the bosom of a white woman. The utter interdependence of such an image; the selflessness, the merging it implies; the giving up of boundary; the encompassing of other within self; the unbounded generosity, the interconnectedness of such an image. Such a picture says that there is no difference.⁶

The Body Beautiful magnificently represents the mother's love as intertwined and transformed into the daughter's giving to her. By strategically displacing traditional concepts of feminine beauty through the mother's incredible inner strength and allowing her daughter (and son) to take on traditional maternal qualities of caring and empathy, the film gives mothers the gift of what is normally taken for granted. Indeed, *The Body Beautiful* focuses on shifting intersubjectivities of love and tenderness that recognize the mother's material realities as well as her intimate desires. The film is so provocative for its power to construct images that articulate the difficult psychic spaces of fear, intimacy, and passion between the daughter–filmmaker Ngozi Onwurah and her mother, Madge Onwurah. The revelations of the intimacies they share are echoed through the film's eventual merging of their dichotomies between white/black, ailing/healthy, aging/ripe, and mother/child. *The Body Beautiful* gives renewed meaning to maternal bodies of knowledge by loving in difference.

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CULTURAL AND MATERNAL NOTES ON
LIVING THROUGH BREAST CANCER

THERE SHE IS, the University of Southern California's self-proclaimed "poster girl" of breast cancer. Sarcastic as she is about her ambiguous status, I don't want to know how well she is surviving chemotherapy. I don't want to know how cheery she is throughout her treatments. And I certainly don't want to see how fashionable and lovely she looks in her soft wool beret, as my hair begins to scandalously loosen and fall from my scalp. She looks so calm, almost smug in her baldness. I am falling apart.

I have made several attempts to read this *Los Angeles Times* series on surviving breast cancer, narrated by this woman who is apparently successfully combining her profession as a writer with her new ordeal. I understand that her affirmative voice and her positive attitude are uplifting and that they refute the usual representation of woman as victim, but her tone is just too goddamn light while my body feels as if it's made of lead. I don't want a breast cancer cheerleader. And especially not today. I throw the newspaper article on the pile of my new research material that has begun to accumulate with dreaded speed. My files spill out from my study into the hallway, clogging circulation. Her pink softness and irritating smile beam out at me from the pile.

Feeling frantic and lethargic all at once, I decide by default to take a shower. This will stop the itching on my scalp. It will relax me. It will also

hasten the inevitable loss of my hair. I have a fleeting and deceptive image that it will, in fact, keep my hair intact. Showers and hair washing have always been luxurious activities for me, followed by the caring for what I can now unpretentiously call what was my luscious hair. I have already had my hair cut short, stylish. I told myself I would do this once I saw long strands stray from my scalp. Cutting my hair seemed to keep it on my head longer. But now it's becoming an itchy mess. So I watch it clog the drain as my tears clog my senses. As the shower water creates a fog around me, numbing me, I hear my then ten-year-old son's voice coming from the hallway, faintly entering my clouded space. "Mommy, you can let yourself be sad, you can cry. But come out of the shower soon. I need some shoes. Let's go buy me some new shoes, Mommy." I try to hear, to take in what he is saying to me, to answer his need to know that I am OK, that I will emerge, but all I can muster up is a pallid, barely audible, "OK, Miles." I am still being drowned out by the unfamiliar sounds of my relentless cries. A few minutes later, "Mommy, are you ready to come out? Let's go buy me some new shoes." I want to oblige. I want to move out from this being buried under, but my body below my head feels immobile. Miles's voice begins to pierce through the opacity: "Mommy, you have fifteen minutes. I am picking out an outfit for you to wear when you get out of the shower. OK, Mommy?" I hear his fear beneath the innocent tone of feigned control in his voice. I am unhinged by his caring and tenderness, his nurturing and coaxing, however tinged with his own need to have everything normal again. I don't mind that Miles is taking care of me, coaxing me back to life. He is the only one who could work through these dreaded transformations with me. His appeals bring me to a place of complete devastation and helplessness. I am his child. I can do nothing but succumb. This child of mine with the wise soul sees an end to this carrying on. He comforts me to reassure himself. I want to stop crying. I want my "fun mother" identity back. But the monumental changes going on visibly and invisibly within me are demanding their own memorials, their own timing. "Mommy, ten more minutes, OK? Then please come out and get dressed." Gently, firmly, yet with droplets of desperation seeping through, Miles's voice awakens me. It reminds me of my voice, the one I use when I want him to finish his homework and yet I know he's too tired to do anything but collapse into bed; the voice that's between caring and losing it. Now Miles opens the door and comes into the bathroom. "Mommy, you are all right. Come out in five minutes more, Mommy, but please come out."

When I finally emerge—I am sure he gave me a very long five minutes—I do my best to cease the tears. Miles has placed a perfectly lovely and comfortable outfit on the bed for me to wear. Just when I try to hold back the

load of tears that threatens to bring us back to point zero, Miles picks up the dreaded newspaper article by the pink-bereted poster girl. In his innocent attempt to ward off the impending storm, he points to the irritating photograph of the journalist. “Mommy, look how nice she looks in her hat. And she’s not even half as pretty as you. You are ten times prettier, so put on your black-and-white beanie, Mommy, the one that looks so pretty on you, and get dressed, OK, Mommy? Let’s be in this world.”

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Maternal Mourning

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN
CIVIA ROSENBERG AND MAY STEVENS

ONCE I BECAME A MOTHER—from the moment my son was born, from the instant that he became a separate being—I was unexpectedly seized by the chilling fear of losing him. If even for seconds, these intermittent waves continue to shake me and completely overwhelm me. Illness, accident, perverse kidnapping, the violence of war, or other horrible events can take our child(ren) from us. Imagining losing my son as an infant, a child, a teenager, or a young man (which he is now), I still hear and feel that terrible fear beneath the lull and chaos of the everyday.

5/24

Dear Andrea,

I received your letter and thought about it. The anniversary of Dan's death is May 3rd and I've been lost this month with the ups and downs of remembering and dreaming.¹

Thus opens the beautiful letter of response to me from artist Civia Rosenberg. Daniel Rosenberg died on May 3, 1988. He was twenty-two years old and was just a few weeks away from graduating from New York University in the Photography Department. His work was on view in the senior photography exhibition at the university at the moment of his death. He was the son of sculptor Civia Rosenberg and Irwin Rosenberg, medical scientist

and director of the Nutrition and Neurocognition Laboratory at Tufts University in Boston.

Seven years earlier, on October 26, 1981, photographer Steven Baranik died at age thirty-two. He drowned himself in the Hudson River under the Washington Bridge in New York City. He was the son of May Stevens, pioneering feminist artist, writer, activist, and professor of art at the School of Visual Art in New York City and the late Rudolf Baranik, abstract painter, writer, political activist, and professor of art at Pratt Institute of Art in New York City.

Civia Rosenberg and May Stevens met by providence as one-year fellows at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College in July 1988. These two artist-mothers were later to create a highly unusual art project from and within their sons' photographic artwork, *Crossings: A Collaboration between Civia Rosenberg and May Stevens*. This work was curated by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo and exhibited at the DeCordova Art Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts, September 14–November 17, 1991. The uncanny coincidences of the mothers' sorrow created rich ground for reflection and artwork. Steven and Daniel were both photographers, their imagery is haunting and intense, and both sets of parents published posthumous books of their sons' work: *Burning Horses: Photographs by Steven Baranik* and *Museum Studies: Daniel Rosenberg*. As Civia described her frame of mind in her generous letter quoted at the beginning of this chapter, "remembering and dreaming," such feelings and actions generated the artists' desire to create *Crossings*: to remember their sons' lives and how they were so terribly cut short and to dream about how they could correspond with Daniel and Steven through their art.

The seed of Civia and May's collaboration began at the Bunting Institute, where Ann Bookman, then associate director of the institute, proposed several groups that might meet the personal needs of the artists working there.² She thought the artists might be interested in how to get work published and how to become involved in the community beyond the university, and she also suggested the formation of a loss group. Several participants in the institute had recently experienced the loss of loved ones: Bookman's father had just passed away, and in addition she recognized the pain that Civia was going through. Four people joined the group, including Civia and May. They discussed the passing of two fathers and two sons. Initially, May was reluctant to join the group because she did not want to open up her grief again. The month was September and Steven had died in October. As it turned out, it was important for her to have a place where she could talk about some of her feelings, especially given the time of year.

For Civia, September was also difficult. She had not wanted to accept the fellowship; she was barely able to function. She had lost Daniel only a few months before. As Civia and May described it, her loss was so raw. But Civia's husband and daughter Ilana urged her to go. She abandoned the project she had planned to do based on her sculpture and abstract assemblages made of wood, plaster, and other materials. Having lost touch with her previous way of working after Daniel's death, Civia felt that she had to start all over again. She began this artistic rebirth by making small, delicate drawings that depict a lone male figure, sometimes drawn in a falling position. Other smaller drawings depict a male figure giving off electrical energy; some of the images depict only torsos. In one drawing Civia covered the male figure with photographs. May visited her studio and urged her to work larger, advice that Civia accepted. She then made several large-scale black-and-white drawings. One drawing from this group pictures a horizontal, sculptural figure with wings, accompanied by other figures that gaze at this main horizontal one. For Civia, these watching figures carry the weight of witnesses. She also made related drawings where one of the witnessing figures turned into a sculpture of a deer's head atop a column that watches an empty boat rowing.

Another drawing depicts a broken sculptural figure with wolves running nearby. There is a river in this cold place. Daniel is part of the scene. A related drawing pictures two figures ascending to the waterline. They seem to be drowning and rising. They emerge from the body and legs of a deer that is also submerged in the water. A small deer's head rests inside the larger deer figure. This is a deeply poignant and tender image, especially because Civia has the sense that the deer in this drawing is she, the mother. Through the imagery of the doubled figures rising to the surface of the water and the containment of the smaller deer, this dreamlike and surreal drawing intimates the mother's desire to hold on to her child and conversely, to let him go. The image of the deer became more fully a part of her vocabulary of mourning in this body of work. Working with white plaster, Civia constructed images of fallen deer whose hooves turned into branches. This imagery adds to the deep symbolism of naming and connection between mother and son; for Civia the deer represented Daniel and her name in Hebrew, *Zviya*, which means "deer." This work became the exhibition *The Death of a Son: A Collaboration and Response to His Art* that was shown at the Bunting Institute.

May recalls her reaction to the exhibition:

When Civia put her show up at the Bunting, she included words about what she was doing and what it meant to her. Civia's use of words was so very fine. Her show was excruciatingly painful. It seemed to me utterly naked and it moved me

terribly. I was not accustomed to seeing anyone so open and vulnerable as she was in her work. I had not ever directly addressed my son's death in my work. To see Civia do this so close to the time of Daniel's going was very shocking, almost frightening.³

May also remembers that a close friend brought armfuls of delicate yellow ginkgo leaves to Steven's memorial. By strange coincidence, someone at the Bunting Institute also gave May ginkgo leaves, which she pasted onto the windows of her studio: "Having the leaves upstairs in my studio and being able to go to the loss group and get to know Civia and her work made a difference, cleared something for me."⁴

The beautiful coincidence of the ginkgo leaves with May and Civia's developing friendship and artistic relationship is one among many of the uncanny overlappings that envelop their imagery and that of their sons, as well as their sons' lives and deaths. Recall some of the images in Civia's exhibition, *The Death of a Son*: descending, drowning, and ascending figures; the presence of witnesses; symbolic animals; rowboats and a river. Civia's family has a cabin in Harpswell, Maine, situated by the water. She has made many sculptures of kayaks with three-dimensional objects inside. Water and the elements of that location feed her work. Water imagery is also central to May's work.⁵ Her stunning painting and collage series that began in 1976, *Ordinary/Extraordinary*, is an ode to her working-class mother, Alice Stevens, in her waning years and a reflection on the murdered Polish socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg.⁶ Some of the imagery in this series includes references to water, both luxuriant and horrific. May pays homage to Luxemburg without picturing her brutal death in which antirevolutionary thugs threw her body into a canal in Berlin after dragging her from bed, beating her, and shooting her in the head. May exhibited some of the last works in this series at the Bunting Institute in the exhibition *The Canal and the Garden*, in which Luxemburg appears calm in the water. May was working on *Ordinary/Extraordinary* at the time of Steven's death. Two years after, she made several paintings within the series that address the approach of death and the importance of keeping ideals alive. *Voices* and *Procession* address the funeral of Rosa Luxemburg; *Go Gentle* and *Alice in the Garden* caress the life of Alice Stevens.

May has said that these paintings were "totally informed" by her grieving for her son:

I had heard that it isn't until about two years later [that] you really have the full impact [of the loss], and that's the way it was with me. By the time I got to '83, when these three large paintings were done, I had full access to all of my feelings;



May Stevens, *Alice in the Garden*, 1988–89. Acrylic on unstretched canvas. 84 x 290 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the Mary Ryan Gallery, New York.

I was all the way home. There were friends who saw my Rosa Luxemburg funeral paintings for the first time and put their arms around me and wept with me because they understood the genesis of the powerful feeling that made them.⁷

One year after the Bunting Institute Fellowship was over, May reached psychic home again. She contacted Civia and proposed that they work together to make art from and within their sons' photographic images. The concept of entering one's own son's art and psyche opens up risks and unknown possibilities. Further, the idea to cross familial lines so that Civia could work with Steven's images and May with Daniel's was expansive and revolutionary. Indeed, May thought that opening up the mother–son coupling could help both of them. In a sense, the psychic stage for this multiple collaboration had already been set through the subtle relationships among some of the mothers' and the young men's imagery.

Soon after their son's death, May and her husband discovered a stunning cache of Steven's photographs. They were utterly shocked to find this

work. The photographs depict toy horses rendered delicate, strong, and surreal. Steven positioned these play horses in different compositional stagings as they underwent various degrees of decomposition and disintegration by fire. The ingenious scale of these photographs is one of their most striking aspects. Tire marks made by huge trucks become the landscapes that harbor the strange activities in which the tiny horses-turned-large participate. Steven arranged and photographed most of these haunting scenes at an isolated place by the edge of the Hudson River under the Washington Bridge in New York City. May describes the feeling and visual sensibility of Steven's photographic tableaux as "a witch's sabbath." Indeed, mysterious and urgent meetings of the spirit seem to be conjured up through these strange and engaging scenarios. In harmony with this reading, the horses themselves seem to be witnesses to each other's changing and burning forms. They are often arranged in a circle as they seem to be watching the mutation of one horse into another inexplicable animal form. The photograph on the frontispiece of Steven's catalog is a particularly dramatic image of mystical mutation. The head of one horse merges with the stomach of another as their movements suggest an unearthly form of coming together. Another horse lies still on the ground beneath them as a wisp of fire that appears like liquid creates an elegant elongation of its form.

Although Steven studied art formally, his images are far from derivative. He attended SUNY Binghamton, then City College of New York, where he majored in art, minored in psychology, and graduated with a BFA in 1971. He also completed a year of graduate study in art therapy at Pratt Institute of Art and studied painting at the Art Students League. He began working with photography independently. His images are highly imaginative and deeply his own. Perhaps it is their intense focus on the use of fire that has caused some critics to interpret Steven's images as preoccupied with the idea of death. This seems like a missed reading that considers only one generalized meaning of fire. Given Steven's use of the burning cross in some of the *Burning Horses* imagery and the slaughter of his father Rudolf Baranik's family in the European Holocaust of World War II, one could interpret some of these photographs in a more historical yet poetic manner.⁸ Thus, perhaps a more pointed reading could consider the burning creatures as more specific symbols of death. Steven's subtle use of fire imagery might well carry these historical meanings, but in a deep and subconscious way. His burning images appear lighter, like liquid, and feel akin to the power of transformation. In this context, it is also interesting to remember the calm and acceptance in the note he left by the river's edge: "Thanks, earth. Namaste."⁹ Indeed, his mysterious, surreal scenarios defined by unbounded,



Steven Baranik, untitled, from *Burning Horses*, mid-1970s. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of May Stevens.

merging, and burning shapes can also be understood as rituals of new life. For instance, in the frontispiece image from the *Burning Horses* book, the interpolation of forms creates a feeling of the erotic in the sense of being sexual, generative, and caressing life and change. Steven's photographic images are also filmic in their embrace of implied movement, flickering light, and mysterious drama.

The reverent and joyous life force within Steven's photographs became even more profound for me through yet another coincidence related to his images and the *Crossings* project. Just days after I met with May to view Steven's photographs, I received in the mail from Civia reproductions of

Daniel's images and saw an exhibition of Frederick Sommer's photography at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. The image that took hold of me the deepest depicts a broken, plastic toy deer set against a field of rusted, weather-beaten metal. This graceful faux deer is missing a leg, and its diminutive size fools the eye. The wall label quotes Sommer: "Poetic and speculative photographs can result if one works carefully and accurately, yet letting chance relationships have full play." The title of Sommer's beautiful photograph from 1956 is "Beato Salvador Alegre," loosely translated from the Portuguese as "joyous, leaping, pious."

Daniel Rosenberg's developing artistic concerns were seemingly different from Steven's artwork. Daniel's interests were aligned with cultural theories that reflect upon the institutionalized representation of others. Specifically, Daniel was thinking about how the histories and memories of various cultures and peoples become generalized and trivialized in museum settings. His work shows special sensitivity toward the role that photography plays in anthropology and natural history exhibitions. His presence is often visible as photographer-commentator on such institutional practices, especially through his use of the camera's flash. Daniel's sensibility revealed his ability both to critique various strategies of exhibition display and, in affinity with Steven's aesthetic, metaphorically caress the animal images he used. These photographic attitudes resonate strongly in *Museum Studies: Daniel Rosenberg*, the book that Civia and Irwin Rosenberg produced from some of Daniel's work. In many of the published images, Daniel's awareness of detail and framing created a third-generation image from the real that highlights the questionable validity of its display as an "example" or as a specimen. Especially poignant is Daniel's photograph of a mounted deer whose sterile confines in the Mt. Fuji Museum in Japan further ironize its artificial state of being. The flash hits the deer at the base of its antlers, calling attention to the beautifully ascending shape of the animal's surreally elegant horns. In an excerpt from a poem published in *Museum Studies*, fellow student Denise Ranallo reflected on how Daniel's in-progress photography resonates within her: "He and the pictures led me to a new space place. Expanding, frightening, and safe at once."

Daniel's and Steven's strong, illuminated, sometimes tender, estranged, and questioning images gave their mothers renewed inspiration. The first inspiration, of course, was the breath of life they gave to their sons. The mutualities of giving and taking abound in this project. *Crossings* offered Civia and May the unusual opportunity to enter into the mysteries of their sons' artistic sensibilities, as well as to touch upon their sons' connections to life and death. Theirs was an active mourning born of maternal and artistic



Daniel Rosenberg, *Museum, Mt. Fuji, Japan*, from *Museum Photographs: Chicago, New York, Japan, 1985–1988*. Gelatin silver print, 9½ x 9½ inches. Courtesy of Civia Rosenberg.

curiosity. As May reflected on the process of working on Steven’s images, she said, “I wanted to capture the same mood he was in. More precisely, I wanted to understand the work.”

The mother–artists began the process by photocopying their sons’ black-and-white photographs and then incorporating stunning aspects of that imagery into their own artwork. May often added layers of thinned acrylic paint and collaged elements to Steven’s and Daniel’s images; Civia

added chalk-drawn imagery and words as well as three-dimensional mixed-media elements that she placed near the young men's transformed work. The mothers' styles of working and imagery shifted in relation to these visual and spiritual interchanges. Indeed, as a result of these reworkings, Steven's and Daniel's photography also took on different media and associations that subtly revealed their artistic affinities. *Crossings* was exhibited in a long, narrow room at the DeCordova Museum, an arrangement that created an intimate and quiet space in which the artists' multiple voices could be heard.¹⁰ Commingling within the work are traces of horses, deer, and other ancient animal spirits, as well as mysterious references to wooded landscapes, water, and the sea. Also residing in the work are the mothers' direct and more oblique references that juxtapose and sometimes merge Steven's and Daniel's imagery. I discuss next some of the works among the many (all date from 1990) that were created for the exhibition.

In the center of her majestic composition *The Hopi Woman with Fallen Horses*, May placed Daniel's reproduction of an Edward Curtis photograph of a Hopi woman, with Steven's mysterious horse images on either side. She then surrounded this horizontal triptych with dark green and gold waves that recall clouds and the ocean's tumultuous movement. I refer to this piece as majestic because May has given a sense of grandness and respect to both young men's images through her use of framing and color. This majestic quality is also deeply resonant in an untitled piece in which May placed one of her images above one of Steven's fallen horses, again surrounding his images with velvety green paint. Her black-and-white painting pictures a white duck gracefully swimming on waters that are beautifully illuminated with a mysterious light. The mother's and the son's images are almost the same size, further conveying the singular beauty of each image and the grace and solidity of their coupling. *It Happened at the Water's Edge* is a declaration and a gentle interrogation of the narrative. May's representation of waves—perhaps a symbol of infinity—surround one of Steven's particularly enigmatic scenes of horses undergoing fiery transformation. The waves of continuity enframe the smaller image of mutating life, as if to embrace change and mystery. A sense of awe in realizing once again their sons' keen visual sensibilities and the mothers' affinities with their sons as artists are the interweaving themes of *He Taught Me to See*. A partial image of one of Steven's photographs of mutating horse creatures at the upper right of the composition is countered at the bottom left with Daniel's photograph from the Mt. Fuji Museum in Japan that pictures a city scene showing two women bicycling in the foreground. It seems as though Daniel had scratched

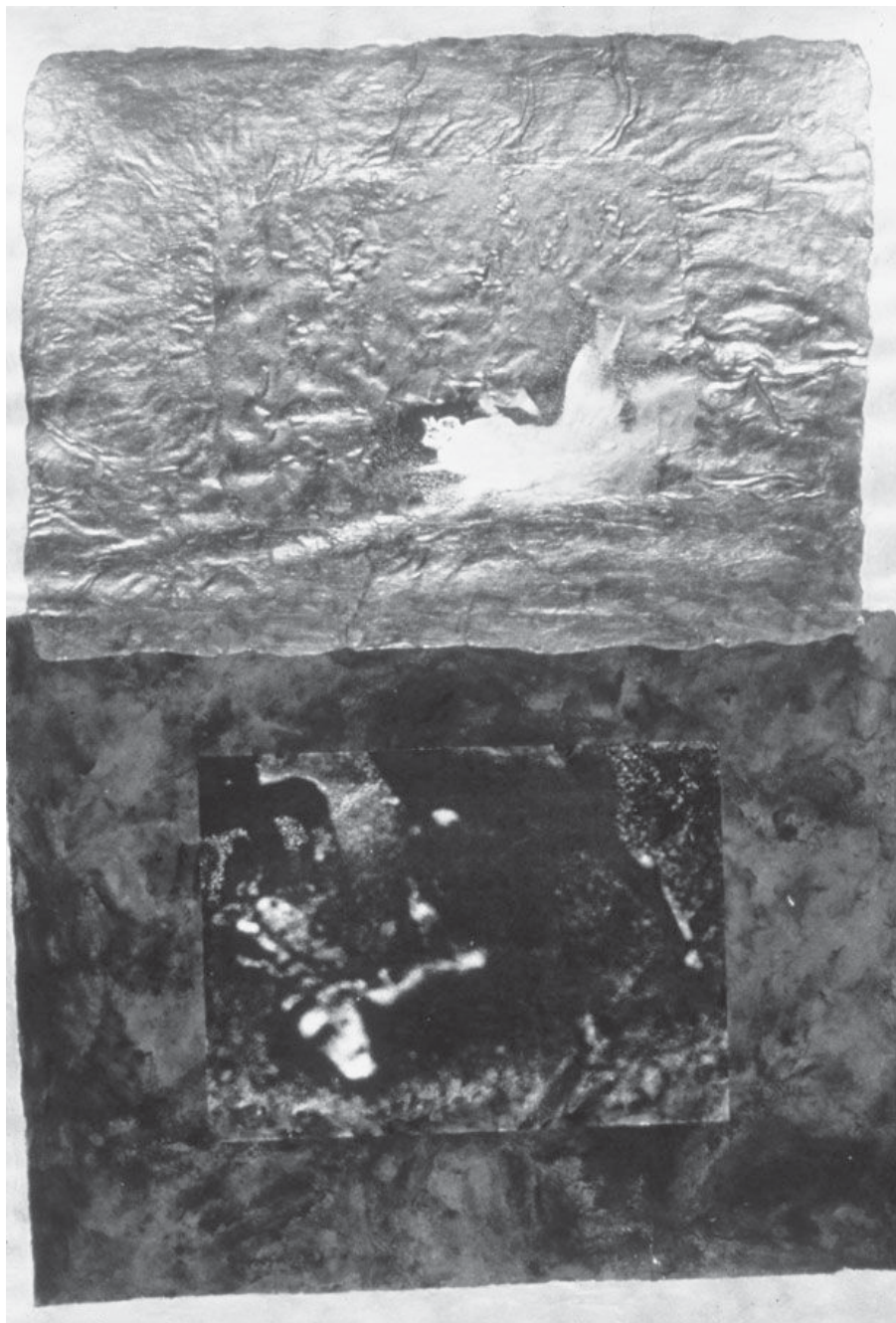
the negative at the area where one of the women bicycling appears, creating a lapse in the normalcy of the scene. May has interestingly brought together both sons' sense of the strange. A swirling line connects their images across the piece's dark background. Daniel's self-portrait with a flash, which May reproduced considerably smaller than the other two images, holds up this sustaining thread, under which May framed Civia's words:

He taught me to see with new eyes. As an artist I had my own patterns of looking and he quietly challenged that. After seeing exhibitions with Dan, I would walk around with new responses and different ways of looking both at the external world and the intimate world of the photograph. It caused me to reflect on my working methods. We talked about painters he admired and spent time at galleries. He was very aware of detail and his compositional eye was acute.

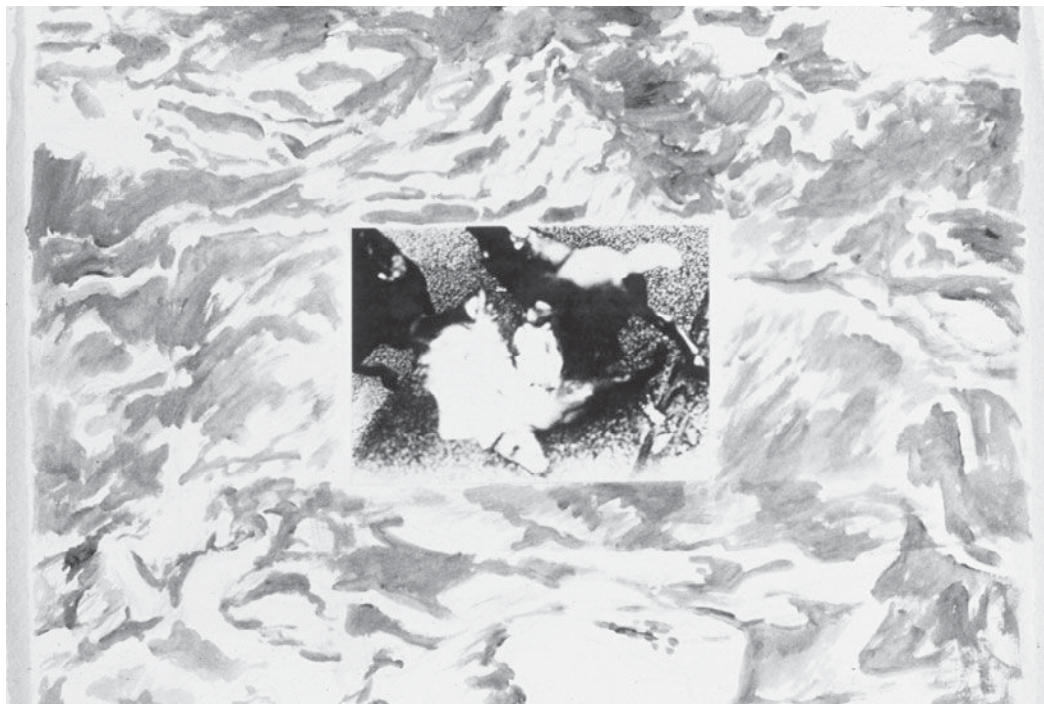
Perhaps in respect for Daniel's minimal and terse sensibility, Civia adopted a more pared down visual approach in many of the images she made for *Crossings*. In *Other Voices*, she used the powerful image of the Hopi woman, as did May, in dramatic juxtaposition with one of Steven's



May Stevens, *The Hopi Woman with Fallen Horses*, from *Crossings*, 1990. Acrylic and collage, 19¾ x 25¼ inches. Courtesy of the artist and the Mary Ryan Gallery.

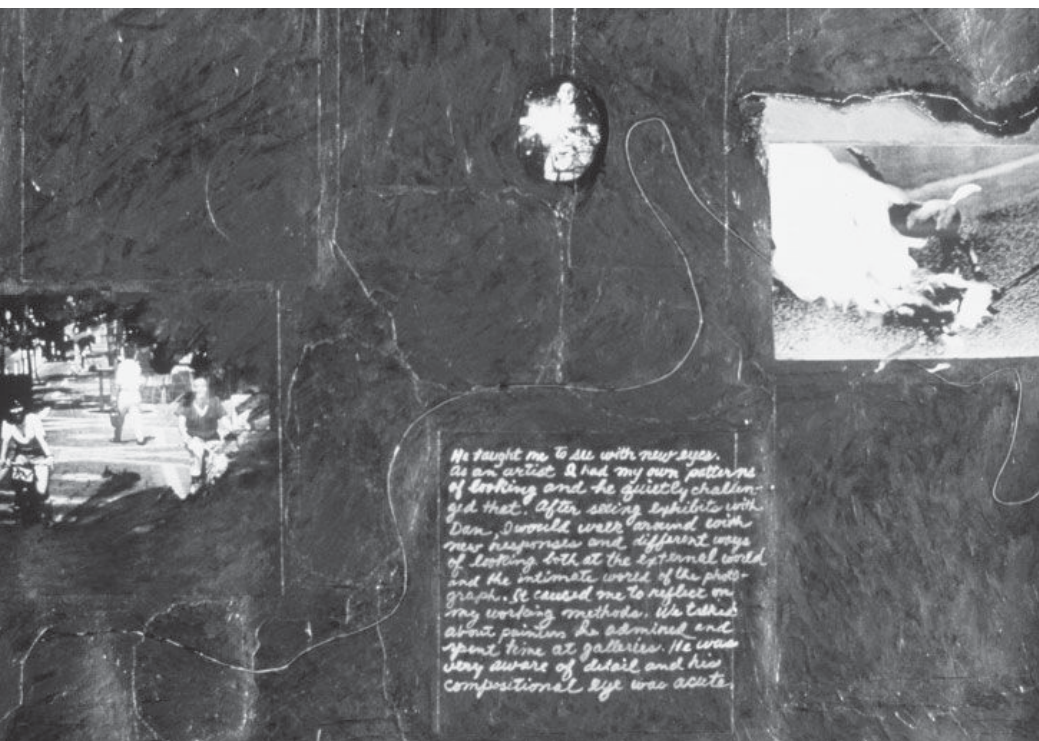


May Stevens, untitled, from *Crossings*, 1990. Acrylic, 26 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the Mary Ryan Gallery.



May Stevens, *It Happened at the Water's Edge*, from *Crossings*, 1990. Acrylic, 19¾ x 25¾ inches. Courtesy of the artist and the Mary Ryan Gallery.

photographs. In this vertical diptych of starkly composed and doubled images, she rearranged Steven's frontispiece image from *Burning Horses* so that the two horses look slightly flatter, appearing almost as mirror images of the other. This sense of doubling and balance is disrupted, however, by Civia's choice of framing. Only half of the woman's face is visible next to a full-frame image of her visage. A white line against a black background surrounds both the woman's unevenly doubled representation and Steven's coupled horses, encircling the young men's images with a sense of calm isolation. *Flash into the Fire* is a triptych in which Civia emphasizes the sons' dramatic use of photographic light: for Daniel, a flash like lightning that renders the image indistinct; for Steven, a light that illuminates like fire, turning clarity into mystery. Civia's deep connection to Steven's work and her sense of the sons' affinities are further evident in a dynamic untitled piece in which her drawings of dark schematic male figures outlined in white flicker with a similar energy and pulse as the fire in one of Steven's equine carousel scenes.



May Stevens, *He Taught Me to See*, from *Crossings*, 1990. Acrylic and collage, 23 x 29 inches.
 Courtesy of the artist and the Mary Ryan Gallery.

May reflected that she found excitement and pleasure in working with Steven's and Daniel's images. In fact, she thought that Steven would enjoy what they were doing. In an experimental work, *Slicing Images*, Civia departed from her more ordered compositional format to create a stagelike photographic collage in which the sons' images are almost unreadable. Her application of white paint is similarly unruly and overdramatized. As May mused on what Steven would think about the entire project, Civia wondered what her son would think about the liberties she took in this particular image. Her response is written in white at the bottom of the composition: "He'd Hate This." This piece is unusual in its self-consciousness and humor. The presence of the artist-mothers throughout *Crossings* is generally less evident, nonetheless powerful in its desire not to overpower their sons' imagery and souls. *Fear Not* is an arrangement of Daniel's photographs of trees and woods in the darkness of night, which surround Steven's nocturnal meetings of horses and other indefinable creatures. A stylized white hand



Civia Rosenberg, *Other Voices*, from *Crossings*, 1990. Mixed media, 16 x 20 inches.
Courtesy of the artist.



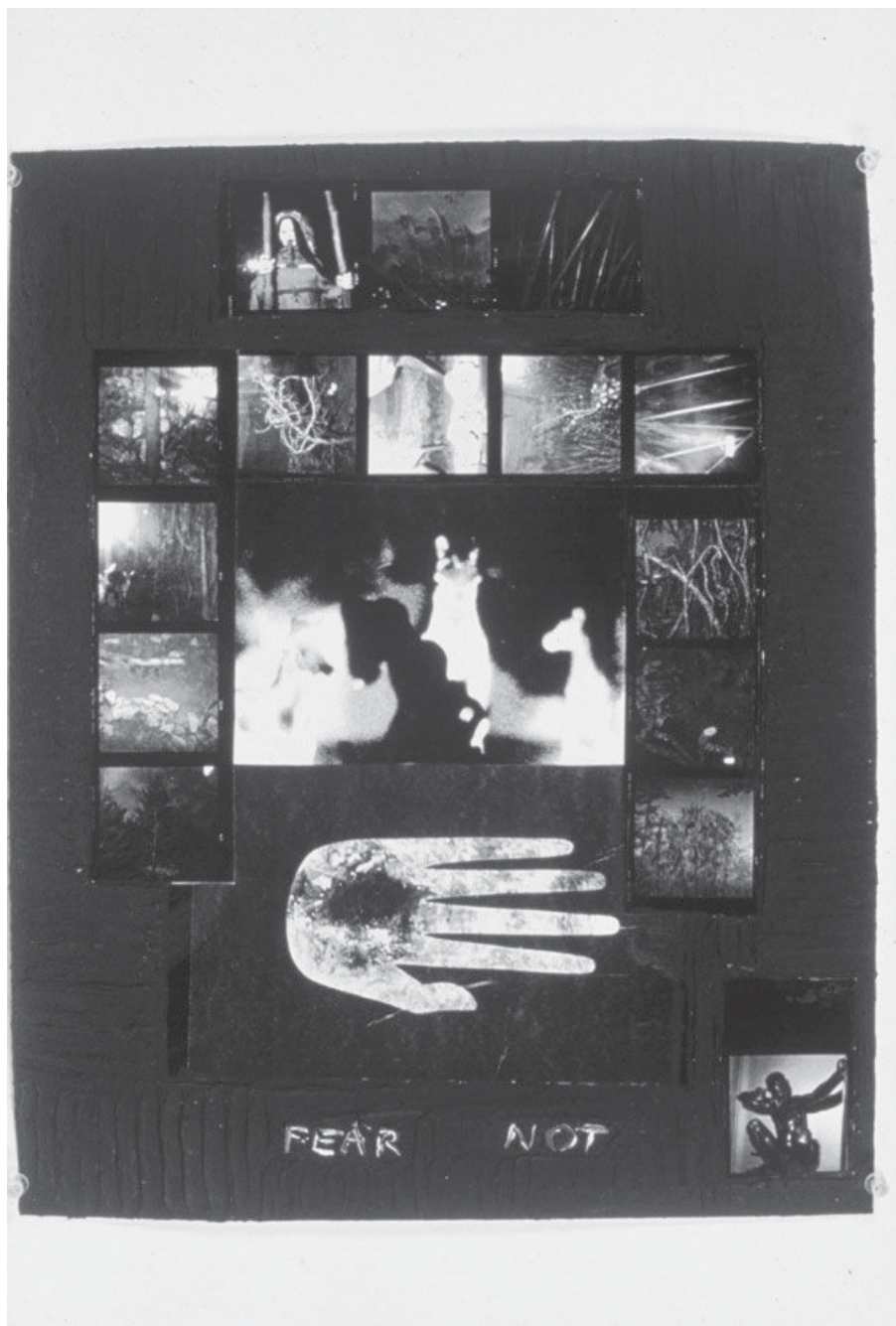
Civia Rosenberg, *Flash into the Fire*, from *Crossings*, 1990. Mixed media, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

lying on its side holds shadows and other indistinct images. This cradlelike hand has a positive-negative presence and absence, a stillness like an amulet or the visual translation of the hand of G—d. The words beneath this hand read “FEAR NOT.”

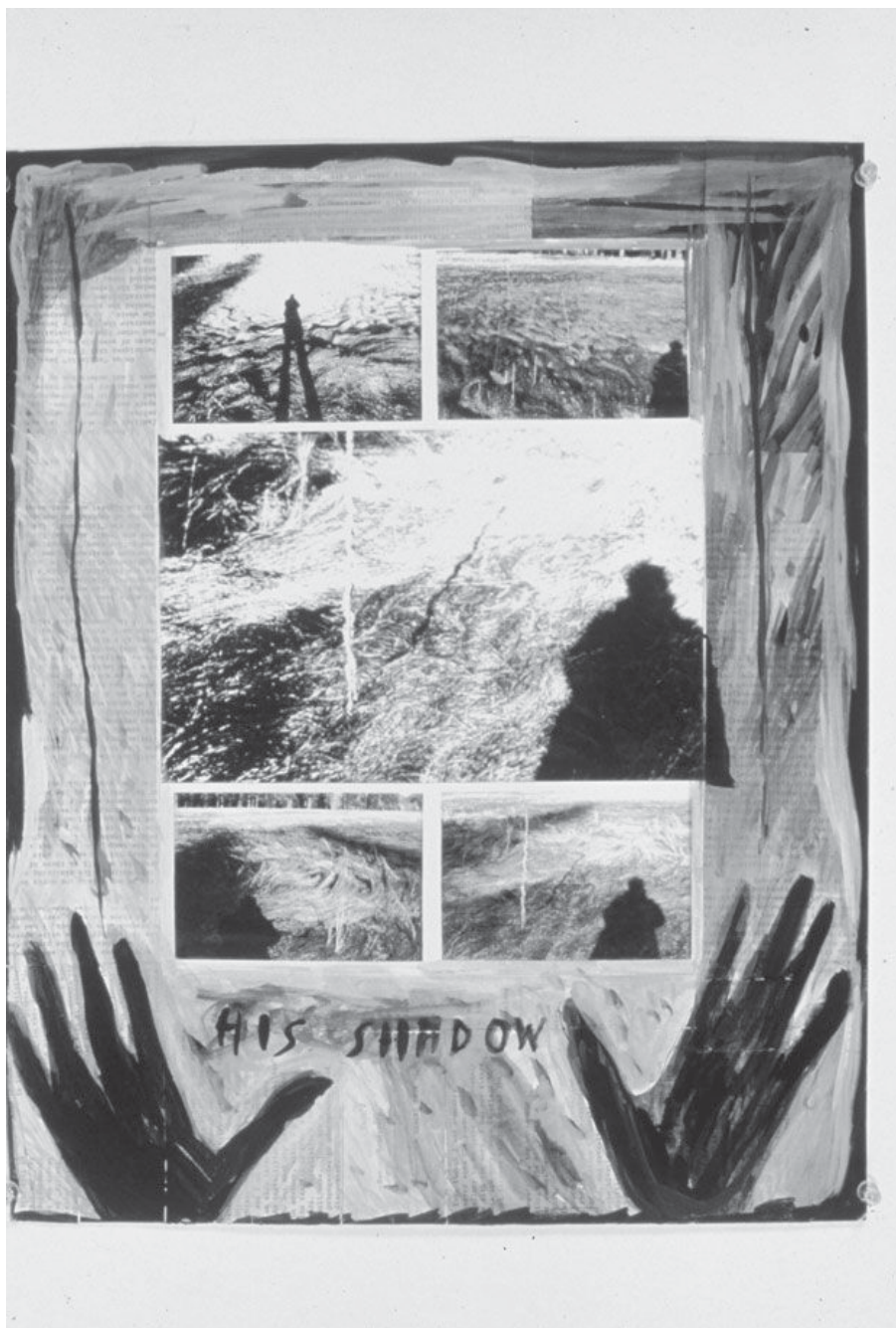
Civia and May chose words from the fifteenth-century poet and historiographer Carlo Guinzburg as text to accompany the exhibition: “Between animals and souls, animals and the dead, animals and the beyond, there exists a profound connection.” Steven had found the body of a small deer at Bear Mountain in upstate New York and brought it home. May put the deer’s hooves in a bowl and placed it in the exhibition as part of the ceremonial spirit of *Crossings*. For Civia as well, it was important to represent this deep spiritual connection between animals and the departed. She said that through the act of drawing these animal spirits, she was “saying goodbye to Daniel and Steven, letting them go.”¹¹ In affinity, a Buddhist nun friend of May’s posed a simple yet provocative question about whether May had made images of Steven when he was young. The image that came to her mind was a painting of Steven as a tender little boy calmly holding an enormous bull



Civia Rosenberg, untitled, from *Crossings*, 1990. Drawing, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Civia Rosenberg, *Fear Not*, from *Crossings*, 1990. Mixed media, 16 x 20 inches.
Courtesy of the artist.



Civia Rosenberg, *His Shadow*, from *Crossings*, 1990. Mixed media, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

by a leash. The incongruity, uncanniness, and humor of the scene still amuse May. She remembers her friend's reply: "Well, that's where he is."

In *Crossings*, the mothers wisely intertwined their sons' imagery with theirs without overtaking the young men's art or departed presence. Keeping the departed one close yet not completely absorbing his spirit into that of the living is an apt and poignant metaphor for incomplete incorporation of the other and "impossible" mourning. Impossible mourning, according to philosopher Jacques Derrida, refuses Sigmund Freud's concept of complete incorporation of the other for a less overwhelming concept of one's embrace of the other's leaving: "[A]n aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us."¹²

Ultimately, *Crossings* is about the mothers' mutually discovering intersubjective and deeply reflective spaces for mourning and healing. Civia and May created pathways for feeling unspeakable tenderness, intimacy, and connection with their sons' presence and absence through working with and across the young men's intense photographic images. This fragile and brave project approached several taboos in Western culture: facing the reality of death and, further, the untimely loss of one's own child; making artwork on this difficult subject public and communal; and creating such work in the state of active mourning by artists who are mothers. *Crossings* demonstrates risk, trust, intersubjectivity, and feminist collaboration at its deepest level. I know of no other project that has attempted to do what *Crossings* has performed. Civia Rosenberg and May Stevens crossed over into their sons' work, psyches, and souls to create art from that deep, mysterious place of maternal mourning, remembering, and dreaming.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

MATERNAL PASSIONS

IN MAGICAL MOMENTS my relationship with my seventeen-year-old son feels devoid of the profound gender, age, and other differences that exist between us. At least this is how it feels to me. Remember, this is the mother's story. I have just received a phone call from my angelic son, assuring me he is OK, that he is safely off of the freeway and on his way to the Santa Monica Pier. He has recently received his driver's license and is careful to set me at ease. He comforts me to assure himself. "How is Grandma?" he tenderly asks. On this unusually gray and chilly December afternoon in Los Angeles, his grandmother, my mother, will be undergoing gamma knife brain surgery to miraculously eliminate a tumor that has spread from her lung. Gender-free and gender-full, I hear the words of Sara Ruddick's wise refrain. The interconnections that flow from my son to my mother and back again in a circular movement flow through me. At this moment, I am not rejecting the myth of the ultimate "good mother." I will ask for blessings from any form of beneficent spirit for the health of my very real and very good mother.

She lives within me and I am ever present within her, just as my son is intimately mine and clearly his own self. The postpartum state is never over. It is a space of continuum, the child and the mother moving farther away, always connected, ever closer, always in flux, a little bit of figurative

mourning. As I write this provisional “conclusion,” my face is drenched with pearl-shaped tears. My sadness for my mother is mixed with maternal joy for my son’s forming sense of his life’s possibilities and adventures. I remember him telling me a number of years ago, “Mommy, I won’t go far away,” his ever-comforting words that marked his fear of my leaving him and his need to rescue me. “I can’t FUCKING die. I just can’t die yet.” It is seven years since these fears and exhortations filled my sleeping and waking nightmares. Miles is now in the midst of preparing for college. I imagine the calm and orderliness with which he will pack his things. Underneath the cheery veneer of my helpfulness/helplessness, I see myself in a surreal state of slow-motion devastation. In her autobiographical novel *Worlds beyond My Control*, author Jane Lazarre likened the leaving of her son to a storm brewing. I feel as though part of me is living in anticipation of such an impending storm. In another passage in this book on intimacies and leavings, Lazarre’s mother character caresses her younger son’s head at the moment he wanted her to stay with him at bedtime:

“I’ll always love you best,” he whispered in a small boy’s voice.

Julia rocked him, knowing he was falling asleep, but she heard the words resonate like a fading echo. She slid him off of her lap and tucked him in. She was about to leave the room, but suddenly she was sitting on the floor, her face buried in his quilt, raw with the loss she knew was inevitable and necessary, the loss from which she felt she might never recover and which she nevertheless had to encourage, even insist upon. She berated herself for self-pity. Was her son in prison? Was he dead? She touched Anthony’s finger, now soft with sleep. Still, she kept hearing the echo—I’ll always love you best. If it were true, she was frightened; if false, bereft.¹

Such lucid articulations of the tearings, intimacies, and passions of motherhood are, for me, the deepest matter of the feminist maternal. Yet be assured that this book is not a prescription for motherhood. Indeed, I never knew how I would get through it gracefully. Sharing myself with myself was difficult enough, in addition to allotting important portions to my partner, family, and close friends. When my son was born, different proportions needed to be formed to make extra-large room for a new love and unknown responsibilities. At least I was born in a generation and culture that gave careful consideration to becoming a mother/caregiver. Although it was a wonderful expectation, my parents were first concerned with my having an education that would sustain me financially and spiritually. If I were to marry a doctor or a lawyer, that would be nice. As it turned out, it was my brother who married a doctor.

When I taught for the first time the course Feminist Art and Motherhood, which my colleagues on the Curriculum Committee thought might be too specific or too difficult, the classroom was overloaded at its first meeting. Over the years this course is increasingly filled with students majoring in women's studies, visual and performing arts, literature and writing, liberal studies, and a sampling of students from business. In the first few years, students understood motherhood and feminism to be an oxymoron. They signed on to see how these seemingly opposed concepts might be joined. In more recent years, the course's various makeup of students has also included a good share of single mothers, some single fathers and even a few sisters performing as mothers, and still more inquiring students, as well as one or two who could not accept that the class is titled Feminist Art and Motherhood, not *Feminine* Art and Motherhood. I never learned whether this small group ever made the transition from the feminine to the feminist.

Similar to my beautifully rebellious, innocent, and unknowingly knowledgeable student whose rejection of enforced motherhood opened this book, many of my students begin my class with reasonable fear of traditional motherhood. It looms large and seems untouchable, especially since this is the mold cut out for them. I increasingly encounter young women and young men who approach the assumed path of their lives with more studied reticence, desire, and curiosity, as well as more awareness of the cultural pressures put on them. High on the list of expectations is to be mothers or fathers, and not to become artists. Thus, I delight in their thoughtful feminist actions that merge maternal concerns with artwork, as in one student's Barbara Krugeresque design of a T-shirt for pregnant women that says, "Do not touch. We are not public property!" and another student's work to create and circulate an artful petition for more access to better child care on campus for student-mothers and student-fathers.

My students are looking for cultural respect for their work as artists and support for their life choices, whether or not they choose to become mothers or fathers. Most painful for many of these deeply thoughtful young adults, many of whom come from extremely traditional Latino and Anglo families, are the cultural and familial pressures they live with. They are desperately trying to figure out how to lovingly unburden themselves of the expectations put on them by those who care about them but do not recognize their passions and needs for life transformations. My students' own words and experiences best articulate these multifaceted conflicts, as well as their desires to find and embrace new forms of the maternal.² The first excerpt is an extreme example of the previous generation's expectations of the daughter-to-be-mother and the painful implications for her:

The sun has been awake for a couple of hours and peeks into my window gently waking me from a good night's sleep. As I roll over, the sweet smell of maple syrup serenades my senses and without hesitation I make my way down the hallway to the kitchen. Sizzling country fried potatoes, golden scrambled eggs, maple ham, and a basket of warm muffins cover the table arousing this morning feast. I am greeted by a big warm smile and an "I hope you are hungry?" No, her name is not June Cleaver or Betty Crocker—it is Lynn Hedburg, my mom. She has been up early making sure that her family of five is well fed before the day of work and school begins. Not only is the breakfast on the table, but also fresh towels are folded, lunches are made, and the dishes are put away. Does my mom complain? No, according to her, this is her job. We definitely have separate expectations and duties in our family. My dad's responsibilities were solely based on the financial stability of our family. As far back as I can remember my mom has always completed all the cooking, cleaning, and any special needs for our family. Grocery store trips, playing taxi driver, and dentist appointments were only a few of my mom's everyday responsibilities. Having a "stay-at-home mom" molded many of the images of what I had believed family and motherhood entailed. My sisters and I learned at an early age that we would one day be expected to fulfill the responsibilities that my mom does, and my grandma did, and her mother did and so on. For generations in my family it was understood that as females at birth we were predestined with the home and family's responsibilities. That meant that the dishes, dirty laundry, and doctor's appointments would one day be our duties whether we wanted them or not.

For me, this seemed to happen much sooner than I had expected. During January of my sixth grade year, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. The news made me feel like I was living in a traumatic nightmare that left me with tear-stained cheeks and a fear of losing the most important person in my life. The effects of chemotherapy were overwhelming. I watched my frail mom lose her hair, gave her painful shots every day, and desperately tried to keep her healthy to avoid contaminating her weak immune system. My mom was unable to complete everyday tasks at home; therefore it was imperative that the responsibilities and tasks shifted to relieve my mom from any form of stress. Being the oldest child, I earned more responsibilities mainly assisting my younger sisters with homework, entertainment and comfort because they were so young and it was difficult for them to completely understand why their mom was so "sick." My dad helped a little more around the house, but he still worked full-time and was not familiar with the household duties as well as tackling any kind of emotional turmoil that may arise with my sisters and me. It was expected, me being the next oldest female in the home, that I would automatically embrace the "mother role." The "mother role" as I had learned from experience included being the emotional support for the rest of the family, as well as doing the majority of the cooking, cleaning, laundry, etc. The combination of the emotionally draining news of my mom being diagnosed with cancer, my new family

responsibilities, as well as being an extremely shy eleven-year-old made it very difficult to have a life of my own. That time of my life was most traumatic and unforgettable. As my mom slowly got better and regained her strength some of the pressures decreased, though much of my learned behavior and attitudes remained. As I got older, patterns of sacrifice still continued. Even entering college I had chosen a career path in order to guarantee balance and flexibility between my career and my future family. I made life choices based on this fixed lifestyle that I believed I was predestined to live. So I guess you can say that I made these sacrifices for an illusion, for imaginary people, and for a life that I deep down am not sure that I want. Now, about a semester away from graduation and I am extremely unmotivated to begin my career. I have very recently separated from my boyfriend of over three years and also decided to put a pause on my career after graduation. Therefore I now have the time to explore other opportunities in hopes of discovering my own passions.

Another telling excerpt honestly confronts my student's division within herself between her own feminism and her fear of motherhood:

I am a feminist. I've felt comfortable and confident with that title for many years now. I felt that I understood it, in my own terms . . . And then there is motherhood. Somewhere along the way, I seem to have separated motherhood from womanhood. In my feminist leanings I've wanted so badly to right the wrongs, to find the truths within societal lies, to understand myself and what I am composed of. I wanted to revise myself as a woman and really understand what that meant. I rarely, however, have considered life as a mother. What would my life be like? What do I think I know, and what do I really know? And how has the exposure to art and writing created by feminist mothers presented me with yet another challenge to my identity?

Every week I feel like I'm revising myself and expanding my identity. I recognize that I have had a tendency to look down on motherhood. I recognize that I fantasize about being a childless adult, successful in my career. I recognize the sexism that I have internalized. In all of my efforts to elevate the status of women, I've overlooked the experiences of women as mothers and their importance. I've ignored a huge portion of the group "women" that I strive to empower. This recognition calls for yet another self-revision.

What is my current revision regarding motherhood? Who would I be as a mother? Through the work of artists such as Mary Kelly and Susan Hiller, the feminization of traditionally masculine scientific documentation beautifully illustrates the passion and activity of the mother-mind. Renée Cox's photographs have stayed with me through their displays of strength and power, the weightiness of motherhood. These artists have challenged my thinking and identity with their representations of experience, making emotions tangible . . . I feel that the work of these mother artists has become the feminist mother I never had.

And another feminist student's lucid elaboration of her fears of motherhood to her own joyous construction of an ethics of feminist motherhood:

Fall 2005

I have just sat through my first Women's Studies lecture. How did I ever live prior to this? I can't stop talking to my mother about this glorious experience. I want to scream and cry at the same time . . .

Spring 2006

A Sociology class on teenage pregnancy has prompted yet another student to preach how mothering a child is a way to have completion, even if you are only 15 goddamn years old. I want to leap from my chair and physically shake this student into submission. "A complete woman through being a mother? Okay. Can I be complete if I want to be the father as well?" Silence. The sweet taste of victory overcomes me and gently soothes my own fears of one day being a "mother" and having to be this perfect creation. Why do I have to follow the patriarchal values set forth from watching my Japanese grandmother mother her two sons? Why do I have to carry on this archaic tradition? If I choose to deny my grandmother and not bear children, am I then defying my culture? Is this another way of killing my identity?

But what if I want to be a mother? What if this feeling that hits me every time I see a baby consumes me and I forget to breathe?

Fall 2006

I walked into my "Feminist Art and Motherhood" class with a history of feminist thought dictating my every move. Class begins, and I wait to see how people will choose to define what it means to be a "mother". Will they envision mothering as struggle, draining, rewarding and enjoyable? Even now, as I recall my journey through feminist enlightenment, it is difficult to allow myself to feel hope for one day becoming a "mother". Some days, I feel like I would be able to handle all that "mothering" entails. "Selflessness" some student shouts, "caring, loving, patient" another replies. And then on other days, I can literally feel my uterus closing up and clenching down hard on my surrounding flesh, reminding me that I would never be able to have the patience and understanding that being a "good mother" requires of a woman. *Mother Knot*. I cannot put this book down. I feel as if Jane Lazarre is speaking to me, speaking just for me, allowing me space and providing her non-judgmental hands to guide me through this personal voyage. "They didn't understand, nor did I have the courage to explain, that I did not fear not being able to work again so much as never wanting to work again."³ My feminist veins run hot as I start to cry and allow the words to penetrate my heart.

Is this even possible? "Feminist motherhood". What does this mean? Feminist motherhood is the ability to embrace error. It is the means to survival in a world

that does not allow for equality, it is a way to honor diversity and demand no less than tolerance. It is a space for women, and men, to care for their child(ren), other people's children, and each other with a love that is unquestionable, yet un-definable. In the beautiful words of Adrienne Rich, mothering is the acceptance of feeling "... anxiety, physical weariness, anger, self-blame, boredom, and division within [one's] self: a division made more acute by the moments of passionate love, delight in my children's spirited bodies and minds, amazement at how they went on loving me in spite of my failures to love them wholly and selflessly."⁴

It is the recognition that we, humans, are not perfect creations. Feminist motherhood, or rather feminist parenting, embraces flaws, allows for failure, and expects struggle from all sides. Feminist parenting in short, means to love fully, allow for self doubt, and tolerate bouts of internal rage while working to create a place of safety for all. For me, feminist motherhood means I can feel the surge of happiness I once felt as I left my first session of Women's Studies. It means I can fight for a space for diversity, demand a world of equality. Feminist mothering for me is the assurance that my heart will be able to provide all of the love I possess. Or none at all.

And in-progress realizations of a new eros of feminist motherhood and maternal intersubjectivity:

At thirty-eight and a half weeks pregnant, I sit here, on the verge of motherhood, wondering how practice will change my definition of mother. Having already experienced almost nine months of physical motherhood, I speculate on how the thoughts, feelings and emotions of the last year will translate into the action of being a mother. I wonder if I can quantify the experience of being a mother into a term like "feminist motherhood"? . . . All mothers begin as individual identities, women who have emotions and lives that evolve on the self. This does not stop when motherhood begins; mothering becomes another aspect of one's identity. When women have the power to make their own choices, whatever those choices may be, they then have their own personal power. When I take that power and couple it with the power of female parenthood, I come up with my definition of feminist motherhood. This motherhood space moves from simply biological into one of thinking, truth and equality. Yes, my child lives literally within me and shares my biological space, but from the moment I saw the first heartbeat and saw the space that it set up for itself, I knew that this was a separate person. Being a mother means being a woman who now has agency for another human life. Each human life deals with the world differently, so this child and I must negotiate those terms as we go. We must learn from each other. Feminist motherhood means thinking about actions rather than blindly accepting what society says is normative. It means that the critical thinking skills I already possess will not be lost when I have a baby. In

fact, those skills are crucial to motherhood because motherhood is a thinking project. Motherhood is about helping another person through this life. Feminist motherhood is helping that person without losing yourself in the process. Motherhood requires at least two people. Feminist motherhood recognizes that the mother is still a woman, a person. Still, I have never even held my child in my arms yet, but sometimes I find myself full of sorrow about the day my child becomes an adult and leaves my home. So, while I recognize the separateness of this person, that strange and surreal place that motherhood inhabits in my psyche is still being negotiated and I suspect it always will.

My students' writing gives beautiful testimony to their deeply embodied knowledge and passions about what the maternal can be. Indeed, when the figure of the mother is no longer regulated, singularized, generalized, and fetishized, representations of true maternal experience come into being. In concert with the artist–mothers and other thinking mothers who inform this book, I hear in my students' thoughts infinite, unmapped possibilities for a lived erotics of feminist motherhood.

The artwork by artist–mothers witnessed in this book suggests just such possibilities. They are constantly in labor to create complex and wondrous representations of the maternal self. Their watchful work leads to the flowering of mutual respect, love, and intersubjectivity between mother and child and flows beyond this passionate coupling to give life to other forms of relationship. Feminist care and maternal actions are at work when, for example, child care is no longer considered trivial and does not present an embarrassment to mainstream mother-loathing-if-she-is-out-of-her-place culture. The feminist maternal is also present in loving actions and representations where sentimentality—to be understood as deep, intimate, and real feelings not limited to gender—is no longer a cultural embarrassment. So that a particular California governor and other perversely minded politicians can see that funding to care for children, the ill, and the elderly is normative cultural practice, not “government waste.” Feminist maternal knowledge works to bring justice to all levels of the public body, beginning with the maternal body and psyche.

The artists I have worked with in this book, and many others not explicitly discussed, pinpoint the cultural impediments that hinder mothering out of passion and truth. They create art and new possibilities on their own terms. These artist–mothers lucidly explode the passé either/or dichotomies between feminist and mother through their embodied thinking and artmaking, giving life to fresh imaginings. Their self-knowledge and historical memories acknowledge the traumatic burdens mothers have borne and bear still. Yet, the strength and cleverness of these mother–artists' work will

not allow the institution of motherhood to delay the representation of maternal realities and reciprocities, the complex giving and receiving of love. Their work has graced my imagination. Writing this book has given me the opportunity to reflect on some of my own exquisite and unnameable maternal experiences. I have been witness to and participant in the intersubjective performance of maternal knowledge in newly conceived cultural, psychic, and other unexpected spaces.

I move from my thinking maternal musings to see what Miles is doing. It is one of those delicious days we enjoy together quietly, each in our own passions. He is engrossed in reading an atlas on the world's oceans. The ocean has always been his spiritual home. When he was eight years old, he asked me if male seahorses were feminist. My mother is out of the hospital. I have baked her an apple cake from my grandmother's, her mother's, recipe. Its sublime aroma fills the house with sweetness.

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Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Daly and Reddy, *Narrating Mothers*.
2. Rich, *Of Woman Born*.
3. Lazarre, *The Mother Knot*.
4. For a more strictly psychoanalytic use of the concept of intersubjectivity, albeit one informed by feminist thinking, see Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects*.
5. Ruddick, "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth," 30.
6. Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation*, 3.
7. Liss, "The Body in Question," 80–81.

1. BREACHING THE TABOO

1. This essay was republished in Lippard, *From the Center*.
2. I interviewed Mother Art in Los Angeles on 5 November 2005.
3. *Womb with a View* was produced, directed, and edited by Sherry Millner and written with Ernest Larsen. It is distributed by Video Data Bank, Chicago (www.vdb.org).
4. See the full script and stills for *Womb with a View* in Morgan and Michaels, *Fetal Subjects, Feminist Positions*. All following quotes from this video, unless otherwise indicated, are from the script.
5. McGee, "An Interview with Sherry Millner," 5.
6. "Susan Hiller on Her Work."

7. Ibid.

8. My thanks to the personnel at the Hayward Gallery, London, who so graciously displayed *Ten Months* for me, 6 April 2001.

9. Interview I conducted with Susan Hiller in her studio in London, 7 April 2001.

10. "Susan Hiller on Her Work."

11. Ibid.

12. Interview, 7 April 2001.

13. Ibid.

14. Hiller's discontent with phallogentric notions of anthropology can be discerned in her later work as a curator–editor through the multiethnic essays she organized and published in *The Myth of Primitivism*.

15. "Susan Hiller on Her Work."

16. Ibid.

17. Rosie Parker, review of *Ten Months*, 47. Rosie Parker is the well-known innovative and provocative feminist art historian Rozsika Parker.

18. Braidotti, "The Politics of Ontological Difference," 89.

19. See Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

20. Pollock, "Still Working on the Subject."

21. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 238–39.

2. INTERSUBJECTIVITIES

1. Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*.

2. This English version appears in *Écrits*, 1–7. It was originally published in the *Revue française de psychoanalyse*, no. 4 (October–December 1949): 449–55, and is a later reworked version of Lacan's 1936 essay "Le stade du miroir."

3. *Écrits*, 3; emphasis added.

4. *Post-Partum Document*, 9.

5. Ibid., 77.

6. "Excavating *Post-Partum Document*," 14.

7. The film *Loverboy*, directed by Kevin Bacon in 2006, is based on the novel by Victoria Redel, *Loverboy* (St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 2001).

8. "Excavating *Post-Partum Document*," 218.

9. See the deeply informed reviews of Kelly's early installations at the end of the book *Post-Partum Document*. See also a list of the various installations of the work in *Rereading Post-Partum Document*, 279–81, a copious book that also serves as the catalog to the 1999 exhibition of *Post-Partum Document* at the Generali Foundation in Vienna. In addition to the interview with Kelly by Juli Carson and the essay by Griselda Pollock, this book–catalog includes an essay by Isabelle Graw, "Some Thoughts on Textuality and Materiality in the Work of Mary Kelly."

10. "Excavating *Post-Partum Document*," 187.

11. Andrea Liss, "The Body in Question," 87–88.

12. "Excavating *Post-Partum Document*," 204.

13. Mary Kelly also produced *Primapara, Manicure/Pedicure Series* (1974).

14. Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," 247–48. "Stabat Mater" is a huge departure from Kristeva's other copious writings dealing with the impossible representation of the mother from a psychoanalytic perspective. This flowing, poetic writing literally juxtaposes Kristeva's bodily and psychic experiences as a new mother with a meditation on the power, displacement, and humanity of the Virgin Mary. For informed criticisms of Kristeva's reiteration of the mother as always under the Law of the Father, see especially Hirsch, "Feminist Discourse/Maternal Discourse."

3. MATERNAL CARE

1. Kastner, "The Department of Sanitation's Artist in Residence."

2. Artist's archives.

3. Kastner, "The Department of Sanitation's Artist in Residence."

4. Interview I conducted with Mierle Laderman Ukeles in her studio in New York City, 20 May 2002.

5. Interview I conducted with Ukeles in her studio in New York City, 19 May 2000. These horrific patriarchal attitudes of restriction were ironically the norm for women artists during the culturally revolutionary years of the late 1960s in the United States. It was not until thirty years later that this unofficial sexism and the traumas it caused artists who were mothers were exposed and discussed in the art world. Susan Bee and Mira Schor published a rare public forum on artists who are mothers in their *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* magazine 12 (November 1992) in which they posed a series of questions to a diverse group of mothers, including, "How has being a mother affected people's response or reaction to your artwork? How has it affected your career? Did you postpone starting your career or stop working when your children were young?" Among the editors' responses to their queries: "The subject proved too painful for some artists who couldn't write responses. More than one artist wondered how we'd found out that she *had* a child, so separate had children been kept from art world life" (3).

6. Interview, 19 May 2000.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Artist's archives.

9. Interview, 20 May 2002.

10. See Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*.

11. Artist's archives.

12. Interview, 20 May 2002.

13. Belasco, "Learning from Landfill."

14. Sara Ruddick discusses this crucial insight in "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth."

15. *Ibid.*, 35. Ruddick brought up these concepts to help her think through the possibility that others can mother, not only the birth mother.

4. MAMAS OUT OF PLACE

1. Ruddick, "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth," 30.
2. This installation was on view 1–27 June 1997, at the Icehouse in Phoenix, Arizona.
3. Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects*, 10.
4. See feminist art historian and psychoanalytic psychotherapist Rozsika Parker's magnificent book *Torn in Two*. Parker's work takes into account maternal experiences drawn from her clinical and personal maternal research, as well as feminist and psychoanalytic textual studies on mothering. Jo Nash wrote a comprehensive review of this book, ending with, "It seems that a dismantling of the taboo surrounding maternal ambivalence such as Rozsika Parker prescribes could lead to a fuller, more creative, autonomous experience of female subjectivity in general, whether women choose to become mothers or not." This review can be found at www.human-nature.com/free-associations/jnash.html.
5. Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, 93.
6. This artist's book was published by the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York.
7. Among the copious literature on photography's displaced role in "revictimizing the victim," see Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts on Documentary Photography." See also Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows*.
8. See Sekula, "The Body and the Archive."
9. I interviewed Cheri Gaulke and Sue Maberry in Los Angeles on 19 October 2006.

5. MAKING THE MATERNAL VISIBLE

1. I was first moved by this remarkable portrait at the exhibition *Hidden Witness: African Americans in Early Photography*, at the J. Paul Getty Museum, 28 February–18 June 1995, guest curated by Jackie Napoleon Wilson. This portrait is part of Wilson's unusual and large collection of photographs depicting African Americans before, during, and shortly after the Civil War (1861–65). Wilson's own grandfather was born a slave. For a discussion of this exhibition and Carrie Mae Weems's accompanying exhibition in response to it, see my critical review "Facing History."
2. Willett's *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities* focuses on the confluences of sacrifice in the mother–slave binding. Willett's important and original book brings together issues in contemporary psychoanalysis, philosophy, and ethics with child development research through essays that range from "The Sensuality of the Good" to "Social Struggle" and through texts by Emmanuel Levinas, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Frederick Douglass, among others.
3. See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. For a beautifully researched feminist cultural and photographic study on one "nursemaid and her charge" in relation to Roland Barthes's concept of the punctum, see Wexler's essay "Seeing Sentiment."
4. See Hirsch, "Maternity and Rememory."

5. In November 1994 in South Carolina, Susan Smith alleged that a black man had abducted her two small children in a carjacking. It was later proved that Smith killed her sons when she rolled her car into a lake with the boys strapped into their car seats.

6. Williams, "In Search of Pharaoh's Daughter," 61, 66.

7. For more biographical information on Sojourner Truth, see Jacobs, *Great Lives, Human Rights*, 107–16.

8. Conversation with the artist, New York City, 12 February 1997.

9. Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 32, 56.

10. Chayat, "Powerful Photos Explore Racism."

11. Quoted by Vanesian, "Black Like She."

12. Among the literature on this complex and in-flux subject, see the catalog to the exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" in Feminist Art History*, which also looks in depth at feminist art from the 1960s to the 1990s. See also Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*. More recent and especially in relation to photographic debates, see Solomon-Godeau's essay "The Woman Who Never Was."

13. See Smith's crucial essay "Abundant Evidence."

14. Collins explored the problematics of representing the unclothed black female body, and lack of these images, in "Economies of the Flesh." For a specific study of black female nudity outside the frame of art, see Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*. The dilemmas of black female representation are also taken up in terms of the particular problems of photographic representation by artist Lorraine O'Grady in relation to her own self-portraits. See her essay "Olympia's Maid." In another brilliant essay on the topic oriented more toward the often conflicting legacies of African American photographic representations, and beginning with her own family album, Deborah Willis navigates a tricky course in her introduction to Willis, *Picturing Us*, 3–26.

15. hooks, "Facing Difference."

16. Williams, "On Being the Object," 11–12.

17. Quoted in Vanesian, "Black Like She."

6. LOVING IN DIFFERENCE

1. I would like to thank Nancy Braver for bringing this groundbreaking film to my attention. *The Body Beautiful* is available through Women Make Movies in New York City (www.wmm.com). Some of the film's contributors include Peter Collis, director of photography; Liz Webber, editor; Richard Gray, sound; Anthony Quigley and Johnathon Hirst, original music score.

2. For Onwurah's different focus on the experience of children of mixed racial heritage and the harassment they face, see her film *Coffee Colored Children* (1988), also available through Women Make Movies.

3. Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, xvii.

4. Among the works of Emmanuel Levinas, see especially *Totality and Infinity*.

5. I am thinking of the many films by Trinh T. Minh-ha, which, although they do

not focus on the maternal image, redefine tenderness, intersubjectivity, and sentimentality in intriguing and important ways.

6. Williams, "On Being the Object of Property," 15.

7. MATERNAL MOURNING

1. Letter dated 24 May 2005, from Civia Rosenberg. Unless otherwise noted, Civia Rosenberg and May Stevens provided all information and quotations in this essay. I met with May Stevens on 4 June 2005, at her studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I have also had subsequent phone conversations with both artists. I am deeply appreciative of the information they have shared with me. (Please note that I use the first names of the four artists in the text of this chapter to avoid any confusion among them. Referring to May Stevens as Stevens could be confusing in reference to Steven, and Civia and Daniel have the same last name.)

2. In an e-mail dated 18 August 2005, Bookman wrote that *Crossings* and Civia's and May's residencies were very much in the feminist spirit of the Bunting Institute's founder, Polly Bunting. "When May, Civia, and I were at the Bunting it was a special time . . . a time when the Institute was still being run according to the foresight of its visionary founder, Polly Bunting. As May and Civia may have told you, things have changed a great deal at Radcliffe and Bunting is not the feminist institution it once was. But the power of the experience we all shared during those years still lives on in many of us." The artists have spoken to me about how Bookman fostered this caring feminist spirit. Bookman is currently the executive director of the MIT/Sloan Workplace Center, School of Management, at Cambridge, Massachusetts. She has authored and collaborated on studies about feminism, the workplace, and the family, including *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, *Care around the Clock*, and *Starting in Our Own Backyards*.

3. Rosenberg, *A Question of Balance*, 220.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *The Water Remembers: Recent Paintings by May Stevens, 1990–2004* was on view 11 June–31 July 2005 at the U.S. Bank Gallery at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The sites of these works range from rivers to coastal lagoons to the ocean; from Ireland to Massachusetts, New Mexico, and California. These large-scale acrylic waterscapes, drawings, and prints represent water as "both subject and content, a universal theme and personal narrative, drawing meaning from the metaphors of flow, fluidity, transparency, and the suggestion of something existing beneath the surface," as aptly described by Jon, "The Water Remembers," 9. Jon further wrote: "Her first paintings of water were of places she had visited with her husband, the prominent painter, writer, and political activist, Rudolf Baranik, who died in 1998. In the company of friends, Stevens revisited these sites, scattering the ashes of her late husband and photographing the ashes as they floated on the water. These photographs became the basis for her most recent series of paintings" (10). Commenting on *Sea of Words* (1990–91), a series of paintings that were on view at the Boston Museum of Fine Art, 1 May–8 August 1999, and that form part of *The Water Remembers*, it is May

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