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Notes Toward New Maternalisms

My Trajectory, My Research, My Political and Social Awareness:

The personal has always been political:

I was grown a feminist from the brute experience of an ordinary life on welfare. Actually we thought of ourselves as working class, like everyone else we knew – it was just that my mom didn't have a paid job and her husband, my father, had died. So she brought us up on the pension. As a child I'd sung along with Helen Reddy, "I am woman, hear me roar" and at fourteen I'd decided that it wasn't right for me to have to iron my brothers' work-shirts. At eighteen, I was the shop-floor rep for my local and at Trades Hall I'd addressed a packed house of angry blokes about the future of our Union; on my twenty-first birthday I had my first sexual encounter with another woman; at twenty-one I was the Women's Officer in the student union at Sydney Uni and to this day I'm the only person in my family to have gone to college; at twenty-six I was on the steering committee for the Artworkers' Union and we succeeded in winning gender parity at the state museum and we managed to herd the cats/artists enough to get the Artworkers' Union properly registered and amalgamated to a more powerful entertainment industry union. By twenty-eight I'd had two abortions – inexpensive and legal, through a women's health clinic operated by kind and experienced medical practitioners. My feminism was very much rooted in material life. I'd decided I would never be a mother. It was the late 1970s and early 80s and there were always, as indeed there still are, struggles to continue. The struggles were always intersectional. My artwork, between painting and drawing, was at once pictorial and concerned with the representation of the doubly absented spheres of the feminine and ordinary life: women's work and the non-spaces of domesticity: watery places like kitchens, bathrooms, toilets, laundries, quotidian and vernacular, narratives of living: plumbing and washing, toothbrushes and cleaning rags.

But consciousness and the discourses of feminism were transitioning: from essentialism, the convictions and surety of which had, in spite of the Helen Reddy theme, always given me profound discomfort, to constructivism, the contingencies and ambiguities of which gave me succor. I chose culture over nature: not of woman born but woman as sign; I put my lot with what I perceived were the intellectuals, for as the precocious youngest child of a semi-literate former factory worker, I knew I had to be among the books. It's not that I eschewed the politics by which my consciousness had been formed, but what fed my spirit and gave me a way out of a proscribed subjectivity was the life of the mind: art, music, philosophy, theory.

Yet the rent always comes due and I always had to get to work, no time for lingering in a discussion, over a meal, with a drink, at a movie: I came to recognize the place of privilege from whence came so many of the intellectuals I admired and with whom I hung out, their criticality an abstraction, the psychoanalysis with which they inflected their critique an extension of the many years of analysis they themselves had undergone. Working to pay the bills left little time or money to be in treatment. The psychoanalysis that was a key component in the cultural feminism with which I was aligned, made little *sense* in terms of the politics of my personal life. I made paintings and drawings that were rebus, pictograms, puns, quotations of images of women and then, a little later, men, the unmarked term, became the object of my scrutiny. There was a certain kind of autobiographical content but not much of the old narrative style; these pictures were slicker, chic. They have always been my labor, and come from drawing as a primary, accessible medium, a stick in the sand can make you a drawing. There persisted an ambivalence about the tension between these aspects of myself and my working life: culture/nature; bookishness/working class allegiance; art/activism; pictorialism/conceptualism; criticality/sentiment.

So I the subject has always been divided and conflicted and the question for me has been how to imbricate criticality, bookishness and the politics of the material world? When our daughter was born I was forty-four and I found that so much was so very physical and physically in place in the mother-child dyad; in the being new-born, hard-wired into her

version of life and living and in her mother, me. Maternity was a real surprise. I was a committed anti-essentialist but, wow, talk about throwing the baby out with the bathwater! I saw how so much was indeed situated in the physicality of selfhood and our subject selves. And by then I'd gotten to know some of the women whose artwork was by some dismissed as essentialist: I think of Carolee Schneeman for one, whose clear-sighted response to the question of her physicality was that the men were never going to let her forget it, and she had to address that. Essentialism sounds like a reply to cultural construction if you ask me.

I recall the slipperiness of my subjectivity in those days, weeks, months, years, of early motherhood: The breasts blooming to enormous proportions, dripping, spurting, for twenty seven months; the child's cry as if etched on the inside of my head, the sleeping form planted between her parents for a decade. Yes. We were those parents. Indeed there's a faded print on my studio wall: it reads 6 Year Fog except the 6 has been crossed out by a hand written 7, which in turn is corrected to 8 and then 9: Nine Year Fog. After that I found some of the equilibrium that others had been able to find so much sooner.

Ha! Motherhood is like a neo-liberal economic think tank. We're all about growth. Actually, I do want my child to be taller, smarter, more adept, healthier, more skilled, but also more evolved, happier, kinder, more emotionally smart, more more more than I was. Growth in the economy is unsustainable. But what if the US/Canada/the developed world applied a mother's growth mentality to the children of the nation, the children of the world? What if the growth the economists speak of was of the maternal kind? Marilyn Waring, feminist economist, speaks of the omitted economic value of both unpaid women's work – the work of caring for children and other family members, especially the aged and infirm – and the absence of the inestimable value of a clean, healthy sustainable environment, without which we all pay. The UN and the world's capitalists look at how a nation's women are treated, with how much respect and freedom women live their lives, as an index of the overall health of the economy. Women's and mother's liberty are directly correlated to the health of the nation. Under a post-neo-liberal culture, I'd like to posit that maternity pays. The maternal was marginalized as genre, minor,

trivial. Julie Stephens speaks to the decline in the value of care in a culture increasingly removed from the values of nurturance, support and kindness. We are lost without it, we will be trumped. Intersubjectivity and intersectionality are for me the most important aspects of feminism today.

There's an imago I have: it's a figure, she's like a character out of a mystery with long fingers and short straight bobbed hair. Her lips are full and I drew her in the 1980s askance and viewed from behind, in pictures, larger than life drawings, that were themselves like mysteries. The curious thing to me is that the figure I drew thirty years ago is recalled to me in the visage and hands of my fourteen-year-old daughter. She and the maternal – that which I resisted almost for ever and which I could very well have never known – complete this image in my mind's eye. I return to the psychological depths. In this I am buoyed by the work of Bracha Ettinger and her description of the non-Oedipal phase in which the mother-daughter dyad are imbricated in complex relays of reciprocal 'asymmetric mutuality' and which as such provide for a powerful counter model to that of Oedipal individuation, that which rests upon separation and individuation. What a different psychoanalytic frame! Communal, intersubjective, caring, joining, across time and space: indeed a model for our new materialism.

For me the maternal changed the speed of my working life. On a practical level I've hardly made much work during the past fourteen years. But I find that I make what I want and not because I have to for the next show. I feel the burden of too many objects in the world. And so, I add just a few and those made from simple elements recycled: broken twigs, abandoned objects, scraps of paper. I use found things and organic matter and seek alchemy, a transformation of the base into gold: small broken discarded things into things of value. This is not the only or indeed perhaps the best strategy for making art and being in our world but it's the one that suits me as informed by this maternal sense. I've never been very good at the other thing anyway.

So it's not that critical thinking ends but that at last I found an intellectual discourse that was rooted in the material world, a criticality that embraced the psychoanalytic and the

materialist, albeit a materiality that is abject, philosophical, and caring as well: As Natalie Loveless puts it, the new maternalism.