

III.

Contemporary Art and the Maternal
Articulating the Maternal Metaphor
in Feminist Art

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“We Don’t Talk About Mothers Here”

Seeking the Maternal in Holocaust Memoir and Art

My mother
she was hands, a face
They made our mothers strip in front of us

Here mothers are no longer mothers to their children.

—Charlotte Delbo¹

*Forced into cattle cars. Squeezed into squalid barracks.
Marched into showers raining with Zyklon B.
Thrown into mass graves.*

*Somewhere a child is crying. “Mutti!” “Maman!” “Mama!”
No one answers.*

WHEN WE LISTEN FOR MOTHERS’ voices of the Holocaust, there is silence. Mothers and young children were among the first groups of people systematically sent to the gas chambers: mothers, because they were reduced yet again to their traditional reproductive role, and children, because they were not strong enough to haul rocks, dig ditches or do other dirty work for the Reich.² The first-hand witnessing of the Holocaust is thus largely a witnessing by children who came to the camps as adolescents and survived.³ Joan Ringelheim, one of the first scholars to study gender and the Holocaust, has written that mothers’ experiences of pregnancy, birth, and death in the camps constitute a specific legacy of suffering. She notes that sexism left women especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, including rape and forced abortion.⁴ Primo Levi, in the foreword to Liana Millu’s memoir, *Smoke over Birkenau*, observed that the presence of the smoking crematoria chimneys, right in the middle of the women’s camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, was an undeniable, omnipresent reminder of the death of their children.⁵

This essay aims to recover the memory of lost mothers of the Holocaust through a study of the work of two of its daughters, Francine Christophe and Alice Lok Cahana. Although Christophe's legacy is written and Cahana's is visual, both women are concerned with similar themes: motherhood in extremis, the complexities and contradictions of maternal subjectivity, and the persistent desire for the mother's face. In addition, their work dislodges idealized expectations and assumptions about maternal passivity. We see mother as protector and advocate in Christophe's memoir, mother as spiritual anchor and artistic muse in Cahana's paintings. These two very different autobiographical projects invite a reconsideration of mothering outside familiar biological, familial, and social conventions, in a time and place where neither mothers nor children were seen as human beings.⁶

I draw on feminist critical theory to explain one of the powerful motivating forces in women's autobiographical work—to simultaneously recreate the lost or absent mother in order to recreate the self. This trajectory reminds us of the emotional power of the mother as an intrapsychic presence that endures well beyond the daughter's adolescence. Women's artistic responses to the Holocaust serve the dual purpose of reclaiming a seriously damaged and traumatized subjectivity while re-embodiment the absent mother, in a thematics of re-parenting.⁷ The italicized passages that appear throughout, and at the opening and closing of this paper, inscribe my own artistic response to maternal experiences during the Holocaust, a response very much informed by my voice and experience as a mother.

Francine Christophe's memoir, *From a World Apart: A Little Girl in the Concentration Camps* (1967) is a first-person narrative written in the present tense in the voice of a child.⁸ Francine Christophe is six years old in August 1939 when her story begins. The fairy tale beginning of the memoir, with its image of a happy family enjoying their holiday at the beach, is quickly shattered when Christophe's father is called to serve in the French army and taken prisoner of war when France surrenders to Germany. At home, French Jews are required to register their identities with the local *bureau de police* and Christophe's mother, Marcelle, obeys the order in spite of her non-Jewish sounding surname; she could have no way of knowing what horrors were in store for her as a consequence of her loyalty. By the time Marcelle decides to flee the family home in Paris for the Unoccupied Zone, it is too late. She and Francine are arrested at the border and deported first to prison and then to four different camps: Pithiviers, Beaune-la Roland, Drancy, and, eventually, Bergen-Belsen.

Francine started a journal of her wartime experiences in 1945, at the age of twelve, in order to document the horror she had witnessed. Her memoir, based on her post-war journal and written in 1967, was completed in just a few weeks, with memories revived by revisiting the scene of trauma. The childlike prose and voice of the memoir are shockingly juxtaposed against descriptions that are far from innocent, including narratives of beatings, suicide, and starvation. At the same time, the use of the present tense conveys the perspective and urgency of a child more effectively than a distanced retrospective past tense.

In the beginning of the memoir, Francine uses humor to underscore the feeling in Paris that this is a “*drôle de guerre*,” a play on words meaning both a funny and phony war. Francine narrates a joke she has overheard that captures this spirit of *drôle de guerre*: “Two ladies are talking. ‘Oh! My dear, I make an amazing chocolate cake.’ ‘Do give me the recipe.’ ‘Well, I don’t use any chocolate, flour, eggs, sugar, or butter...’ ‘And is it good?’ ‘No!’”⁹ Amusement rapidly gives way to terror as more and more arrests are made, property is confiscated, and Jews are forced to wear the yellow star. Posters appear in the *métro* and the streets portraying Jews with pointed chins, evil eyes, thick lips, hooked noses, clawed hands. Francine’s family is not religious—they celebrate Christmas with a tree—and, through the internalization of these distorted images, she learns to see herself as monstrous: “I have learned that I am Jewish, that I am a monster, and that I must hide myself.”¹⁰

Francine’s insistence that a terrible mistake has been made, that she is French, not Jewish, occurs again and again. The yellow star becomes a sign of race when other signifiers such as surname and hair color fail. At the *Gare de l’Est* on the way to Bergen-Belsen, Francine says to Marcelle, “Oh Mother! How I wish I could tear this star off. I don’t want people looking at me like that anymore. Make these people go away. I am not an animal.”¹¹ The fragility of national identity and the arbitrariness of social constructions of race are underscored when Uncle Charles, Francine’s grandmother’s second husband, a Catholic who is a close friend of Pétain, goes to visit him to plead for the release of Marcelle and Francine. “This is about a mother and her child,” he tells Pétain, invoking what he assumes will be regarded as an iconic relationship that transcends considerations of race. “Bah, Jews,” says Pétain, and the two are not freed.¹²

Francine is a compassionate witness who is keenly attuned to other children and their suffering. At Drancy she writes,

The herds of children filing by! Heads shaved, hollow cheeks, sometimes in rags, sometimes tied together with rope. Gener-

ally children of Central European Jews, automatically separated from their parents.... We ask them their names, their ages, and they don't reply. Beaten dogs, stunned, they have forgotten everything.¹³

She identifies with these small prisoners, noticing that their arms are etched by scratch marks where their mothers gripped them as they were taken away. Animal metaphors resonate frequently as Francine struggles to retain her humanity while she is starving: "I'm turning into an animal who thinks only of its empty stomach."¹⁴

The blurring of the line between childhood and adulthood in the camps is another recurrent motif, because children in the camps are subjected to the same brutality as adults. Of Beaune-la Roland, Francine writes, "Since I no longer know what good times really are, I blossom, I skip ... and I take under my protection several children who have lost their parents." She says, "At Drancy I forgot my age. Very old, very young."¹⁵ Francine's ability to nurture orphaned children enables her to emulate her mother, who is beloved by other prisoners for the kindnesses she shows them as barracks supervisor. Many send cards to Marcelle, write her poetry, and praise her kindness in a letter signed by sixty women. Francine is influenced by her mother's generosity, stamina, and resourcefulness. Marcelle's work as a nurse and supervisor takes her away from Francine during the day, and the little girl is left to fend for herself. We hear her anguish when Francine complains that she is only ten years old and wants her mother to herself.

In May 1944 mother and daughter are deported to Bergen-Belsen. Thus far, Marcelle and Francine have been shielded by the protections of the Geneva Convention because they are related to a prisoner of war, but at Belsen they lose their protected status. Upon arrival, mother and daughter try to sustain themselves and their creativity. Madame Christophe reads a children's book written by her husband to a group of youngsters. Francine befriends a Dutch girl in spite of the language barrier that divides them. She learns some Yiddish from an Eastern European woman. Yet these efforts soon fade in the overwhelming struggle to survive.

The stench of burning flesh. Dysentery, the draining of the bowels. Beatings. Typhus. So many lice that Francine's head must be shaved. Freezing outside during morning roll calls. Corpses everywhere. A constant hunger, so fierce the women fight each other for bread to give to their children. Francine's chest caves in, her bones stick out, and her stomach swells. In the barracks,

a mother and daughter are being eaten alive by lice. A group of women try to rescue them, but it is too late, the mother dies. The women hear that in the men’s camp, the prisoners eat one of their dead.

For Francine, the hunger and terror is so great she becomes angry at Marcelle. She reminds her mother every day she is hungry, so that Marcelle will not forget: “Mother, do you hear?” We do not hear the mother’s voice in reply, for what is there to say? This is Bergen-Belsen: “Dead bodies lie in every corner. The crematorium chimney smokes all the time.”¹⁶ Francine imagines she will escape by climbing inside her mother’s womb, the archetypal place of safety and protection.

How to survive? Marcelle trades some sugar in exchange for a yellow enamel basin that allows her and Francine to wash and relieve themselves in a place other than the barracks corner. Another survival strategy: the women imagine themselves eating croissants and drinking coffee in Paris, an example of Viktor Frankl’s theory that the prisoners’ capacity to imagine the past or the future helped keep hope alive.¹⁷ A small miracle: a baby is born in the Belsen hospital and Marcelle goes to visit the mother, bringing her a special gift—a bit of chocolate she has saved. Such gestures, that nurture relationships and community, prevent the women from becoming *Musulman*, the term used in the camps to describe the walking dead—those who can no longer take care of themselves—who will soon be selected for the gas chambers.¹⁸

With the Russians advancing, Belsen is evacuated; prisoners are either shot or loaded on trains that are on their way to being blown up by explosives. Marcelle leaves her train to gather some grasses to eat and does not have the strength to return—another prisoner drags her aboard. Francine at first does not know her mother has boarded a different car and cries out that she cannot live without her mother, a *cri de coeur* telling her personal truth. The train, liberated by the Russians before it reaches its destination, a mined bridge, is abandoned, and, although Marcelle nearly dies of typhus in a Russian hospital, mother and daughter survive.

From a World Apart explores the hell of camp life through the eyes of a child who sees everything and forgets nothing. The conventional maternal role is expanded when the daughter becomes mother to her own mother. For example, Marcelle asks Francine whether she should trade her wedding band for more food for the two of them, and Francine tells her not to, saying Marcelle must keep the ring as a reminder of her marriage, an act of empathy and altruism unusual in someone so young.

Francine becomes a woman at the age of twelve, having learned the responsibilities of mothering at an age when most girls are worried about their appearance. Clearly, the mutuality between mother and daughter, where both nurture one another, is critical to their survival.

Alice Lok Cahana's work is on view at the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg, where our family has gone to vacation. I go alone to the museum while everyone else is at the pool. On the first floor is a cattle car—not a replica but the thing itself used to transport people to the camps. Cahana's work is displayed on the second floor. I can scarcely concentrate because I am not sure whether the cries I hear come from the walls, or the cattle car—or me.

Emily Dickinson's poem, "My life closed twice before its close" serves as a metaphor for the Holocaust experiences of artist Alice Lok Cahana:

My life closed twice before its close;
 It yet remains to see
 If Immortality unveil
 A third event to me,
 So huge, so hopeless to conceive,
 As these that twice befell.
 Parting is all we know of heaven,
 And all we need of hell.¹⁹

Deported from Sarvar, a village in Hungary, to Auschwitz at the age of fifteen, Cahana not only survived this first death sentence but also escaped a second: she was standing inside the gas chamber waiting for the gas when the *Sonderkommando* uprising began. Miraculously, she escaped with her life, an event she describes in Steven Spielberg's documentary *The Last Days*. Cahana lost her mother, two brothers, a cousin, and her grandfather in Auschwitz. Her sister survived the camp but died shortly after liberation, although Cahana did not know this and searched for her sister for fifty years.

A thematic of motherhood is central to Cahana's paintings and collages. In an interview in *The Last Days*, a book based on the documentary, she noted she was a mother to her youngest brother, Imi, who was five years old at the time of deportation.²⁰ Imi was sent to the gas chambers, along with her mother, grandfather, and brother Ocsi (age ten) upon arrival in Auschwitz. Thus, Cahana experienced her entry into Auschwitz

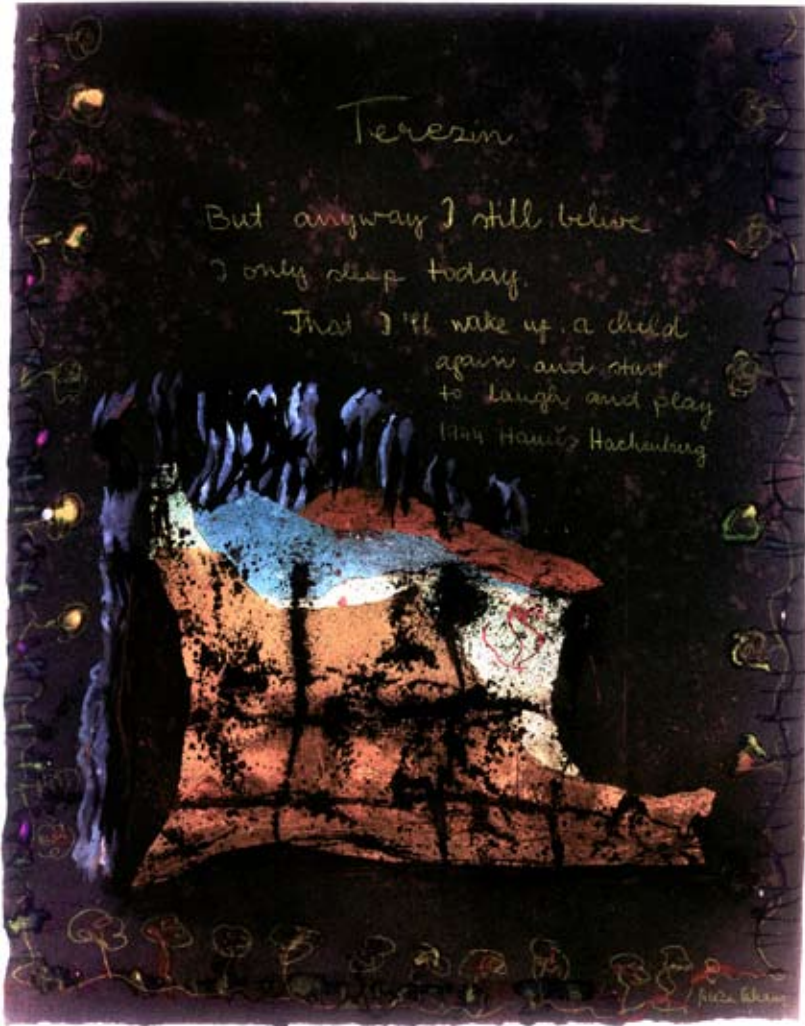
as one of maternal loss. As a surrogate mother to her brother, Cahana was excruciatingly aware of the suffering of mothers in Auschwitz. She remembers approaching a Nazi guard, not knowing prisoners were not allowed to address the SS, and asking where her mother was. For her temerity she received a slap in the face, along with the response, “We don’t talk about mothers here.”²¹ Later she approached a *kapo*, a prisoner who supervised other prisoners in return for favors and privileges from the Nazis, and asked again for her mother. The woman pointed to the smoke from the crematorium and replied, “There is your mother, and don’t ask me this ever again.”²²

Cahana started writing about what she witnessed at Auschwitz shortly after the war ended. She had always wanted to be an artist. As a child, she used to sit in her father’s factory and watch the workers weave sisal and fibers into rugs and baskets. In an interview with Barbara Rose, she describes the first piece of art she made, at a work camp called Guben, when she was asked to decorate the barracks for Christmas.²³ There were no pencils, no crayons, no paper—nothing except a broom for sweeping. Cahana says, “I decided we [children] should choreograph ourselves into a living candelabra and hold the pieces of the broom as part of this sculpture.”²⁴ For her creativity she and the other children were awarded a prize, a small can of snails for each.

After liberation Cahana went to Sweden to recover. In 1959 she moved to Houston and studied at the University of Houston and then at Rice University, where she encountered the color field paintings of Rothko, Pollock, Motherwell, and Morris Louis. Her work as an abstractionist came to a halt during a visit to Sarvar in 1978, when she realized that no one remembered her mother or the vanished Jewish community. She began to paint about the Holocaust as a way of honoring her mother’s memory and creating a memorial for those who had perished: “My art and my writing are my *Kaddish* (the prayer for the dead) for those who did not survive.”²⁵

Women often recreate their lost, absent, or damaged mothers through art. The painting, poem, book, or film embodies and restores that severed connection. I see this happening in my own work: the more my mother loses her voice to Alzheimer’s, the more I write about her. I create her over and over, in multiple stories and guises. Which leads me to wonder: is art the mother?

Cahana grew up in an Orthodox home. Reinventing spirituality in Auschwitz, a place designed to destroy the human spirit, was Cahana’s



Alice Lok Cahana, *Children's Poem: I Still Believe*, 1978-79.
Mixed media on paper, 32 × 26 inches.

act of resistance, enabling her to keep hope alive and maintain a strong psychic connection to her dead mother. She and her sister Edith encouraged other prisoners to join in singing “Shalom Aleichem,” the prayer welcoming the Sabbath, in the camp latrines. The two traded their bread rations for Sabbath candles. While such acts speak of a strong faith, they also memorialize the lost mother and nurture her memory, since lighting the candles and welcoming the Sabbath are a maternal obligation.

Many of Cahana’s paintings are collages incorporating fragments from printed materials such as archival photographs, newspaper clippings, and Jewish texts such as the Passover *Haggadah*. The medium of collage, which relies on nonlinearity and fragmentation, seems especially appropriate to the telling of this story of loss and devastation. Too, the torn paper in collage evokes the renting of garments during *shiva*, the Jewish period of mourning. Some of the work is done in muted grays and blacks, colors of death and destruction. The persistent imagery of train tracks, a reminder that this was the only way into Auschwitz, compels viewers to imagine themselves as travelers on that apocalyptic journey. Other paintings use color in startling ways—slashes of red, bursts of gold and orange, markings of blue and green. While reds and yellows evoke the flames of the crematoria, the blues and greens are unexpected in their evocation of the natural world. Is Cahana reminding us of our competing desires for creativity and destruction, birth and death?

One of Cahana’s most powerful works, *Pages from My Mother’s Prayerbook* (1983) inscribes the tensions between creativity/birth and destruction/death in uncanny ways. At the very center of this collage is a page reproduced from Cahana’s mother’s prayerbook, which survived the war in her father’s hands (her father had escaped deportation by hiding in Budapest, finding shelter in one of Raoul Wallenberg’s “safe houses”) and which her father gave to her after the war was over. The printed text is the mother’s face, while the collage as a whole restores the mother’s body. Luminescent teals and pinks are simultaneously beautiful and horrifying, reminding the viewer at first glance of abalone, and, on closer inspection, bruises or wounds. The paper has a crackled surface, evoking the delicacy and sacredness of the Torah scrolls printed on parchment and the shocking fragility of parched skin. The edges of this work are torn and burned, a reference to the rupture of families and the unspeakable burning of human bodies. The calligraphic marks may be read both as Hebrew letters or lives (lifelines) interrupted. In the upper left hand corner, two of these marks look like the letter “s,” or SS.

Sabbath in Auschwitz (1985) refers to an eponymous poem written by Cahana after the war. In the poem, Cahana describes how she and her sister Edith used to whisper at night, imagining themselves arranging the table for Sabbath and lighting the candles. The painting is bordered like a tablecloth, in a field of soft greens and blues. Within that frame are shadowy, ghostlike images that evoke human hands, heads, and smoke. This blurring of the human form with non-human elements simultaneously attracts and repels the viewer. A similar response is evoked by Cahana's use of color, in which a background of opalescent teals and blues is highlighted by smears of red and strokes of black. Torn pages from the *Haggadah* provide a cultural and religious frame for Cahana's experience. In fact, as with *Pages from My Mother's Prayerbook*, Cahana's unconventional juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular, the historical and the familial, the beautiful and the horrifying, creates work that is simultaneously emotionally visceral and aesthetically powerful.

In "*Children's Poem: I Still Believe*," the devastating losses experienced by children are explored. The blackened paper is bordered by child-like relief drawings of flowers and trees that resemble barbed wire. In the center of the painting is an amber image that resembles a boot or perhaps a flame topped by ghostly apparitions. In relief above this image are lines from a poem called "Terezin" written by Hanus Hachenberg (the poem may be found in a collection of children's drawings and poetry from Theresienstadt, entitled ... *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*...): "But anyway I still believe I only sleep today/That I'll wake up, a child again and start to laugh and play."²⁶ The painting, haunting in its representation of darkness and death through the voice of a child, is a visual expression of anguish.

Taken together, the written and visual testimonies of Christophe and Cahana are a starting point for a mapping of maternal texts. Their insistence on motherhood as dynamic rather than static, complex and contradictory rather than monolithic, active rather than passive, socially mediated rather than biologically determined, demands that we shift the figure of the mother from its altar of iconic beatitude to a place where the wishes and desires of mothers can be expressed, where their voices can be heard. The specificity of mothers' suffering during the Holocaust, of lives created and lost, situates them at the epicenter of this catastrophic story, demanding an account that is not forgotten.

At the gates of Auschwitz stands a little girl. In her hand is a crumpled piece of paper, a picture of her mother's face. The little girl is waiting for her mother. She will wait forever.

Notes

¹Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 55.

²Gisela Bok notes that the Nazis used women’s childbearing abilities to achieve their racist goals: “The surest method of birth control is death, and Jewish women were targeted accordingly.” Gisela Bok, “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State,” in *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, eds. (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 162.

³Accounts vary as to how old children needed to be to be deemed strong enough for physical labor. Liana Millu tells the story of an eight-year-old boy in Auschwitz who survived the selection and was put to work. Liana Millu, *Smoke Over Birkenau* fwd. Primo Levi, trans. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986).

⁴Joan Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,” in *Different Voices*, 375.

⁵Primo Levi, “Foreword,” *Smoke Over Birkenau*, 7.

⁶Barbara Rose notes the recurrence of floating numerals in Cahana’s work, a reference to the reduction of a person to the number inscribed on prisoners’ arms. Alice Lok Cahana, Barbara C. Gilbert, Barbara Rose, Alfred Gottschalk, Sybil Milton, *From ashes to the rainbow: a tribute to Raoul Wallenberg, works by Alice Lok Cahana* (Los Angeles: Hebrew Union College Skirball Museum, 1986).

⁷Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes re-parenting as an artistic collaboration between mother and daughter in which the daughter enters a more dominant art form in order to make prominent the work that both have achieved. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 94.

⁸Francine Christophe, *From A World Apart: A Little Girl in the Concentration Camps*, intro. Nathan Bracher, trans. Christine Burls, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

⁹*Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*, 40.

¹²*Ibid.*, 42.

¹³*Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

¹⁸Myrna Goldenberg notes that often women’s socialization skills in the home

helped them survive: "Women and girls found that this socialization, which included sewing and food preparation, provided avenues for survival that usually were unavailable to men and boys." Myrna Goldenberg, "Testimony, Narrative, and Nightmare: The Experiences of Jewish Women in the Holocaust." *Active Voices: Women in Jewish Culture*. Maurie Sacks, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 95.

¹⁹Emily Dickinson, "My life closed twice before its close," was first published in Dickinson's posthumous third collection, *Poems by Emily Dickinson, third series*, 1896. The poem has been published in other anthologies under the name "Parting." The version of the poem used here was taken from Lilia Melani, "Emily Dickinson: Pain," <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/closed.htm>, accessed 1/07/11.

²⁰Steven Spielberg and Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, *The Last Days*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 60.

²¹Ibid., 67.

²²Ibid., 69.

²³Rose, *From Ashes to the Rainbow*, 61.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., 32.

²⁶Hanus Hachenberg, "Terezin," in ...*I Never Saw Another Butterfly...: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*, ed. Hana Volavková, (New York: Schocken, 1994), 20.

MIGNON NIXON

Epilogue: *Spider*

Is it possible to reach the limits of primal repression, the point at which the symbolic character of human nature collapses into chaos? The analyst's heartfelt anguish is so clearly necessary, in the voyage to this estrangement, that few among us can tolerate it: few indeed are the analysts who possess enough of an ability to sublimate so they can "dive in" without "drowning."¹

TO DIVE IN WITHOUT DROWNING, to embark on the voyage to estrangement with the help of anguish and a heightened capacity for sublimation: this, according to Julia Kristeva, was Melanie Klein's gift, or ambition, "revealed in all its unbearable radicalism" in the institutional crisis of psychoanalysis in the 1940s.² For Klein was not alone: "women joined Melanie Klein in taking this risk en masse" (but "also counted among her most prudent adversaries"), plunging into the waves of an unconscious so inchoate it could only be described as chaos or abyss—or watching anxiously, reprovingly, from the shore.³ The Oedipal scenario of patriarchy and psychoanalysis, in which men vie over a woman (whether mother or muse, disciple or daughter), was transformed into a contest between women over the corporeal fantasies of a child.

Louise Bourgeois was curious enough about the intellectual history of child analysis to consider professional training in the field in the early 1960s. Long before that, when she first turned to sculpture, the culture of child analysis helped shape her art. It is here in this shadow world of psychoanalysis that Bourgeois's work is theoretically founded. Especially in the sculpture she produced in the 1960s and early 1970s, Bourgeois seems to seek out "the limits of primal repression." Her roiling, viscous *Lairs* and *Soft Landscapes* test this limit in sculptural terms, even as her pointed return to the traditions of the sculptural medium in polished marbles and bronzes firmly demonstrates a countervailing "ability to

sublimate.” In effect, her work argues for the potential of sculpture to encompass the death drive: to enact destruction as an early and persistent trend, but one indissolubly linked to an equally primitive and tenacious tendency toward sublimation. For as Leo Bersani has observed, it is a singular feature of Klein’s earliest theoretical writing that she attributes the capacity—even the instinct—for sublimation to the subject in the process of emergence, to the child.⁴

Klein, asserts Kristeva, “ripped off the veil of a culture based on the sacred conversation between mother and child, if not indeed on the Pietà itself.”⁵ Her risk was to reorient psychoanalysis toward the mother and the death drive *at once*. In the body of work she has produced over seventy years, Louise Bourgeois has pursued this negative trend in psychoanalysis—the death drive as an effect of the maternal-infantile relation—with an abiding determination comparable to Klein’s. In this, she refutes an anxiety about the maternal body that has long haunted feminism, a fear Jane Gallop has described as the fantasy of “being trapped in some embarrassing, infantile, imaginary relation to the maternal body.”⁶ In Bourgeois’s work, the imaginary maternal-infantile relation is instead the mother lode, a uniquely privileged site of theoretical and artistic investigation.

*I was called Louise because Mother was a feminist and a socialist;
her ideal was Louise Michel, the French Rosa Luxemburg.*⁷

Unspoken in the artist’s story of her own naming is the compromise fashioned between Joséphine Fauriaux and her husband, Louis Bourgeois, whose favorite child, in being the namesake of Louise Michel, was also named for him. And so Louise Bourgeois’s story begins with an act of naming that places her on the fault line between feminism and psychoanalysis, between her mother’s feminist socialist politics and the patriarchal order of sexual difference that Jacques Lacan would famously describe, with special reference to French society of the time, as the Name of the Father.

Like her own mother, a restorer of antique tapestries, Bourgeois combined the work of parenting with that of her art. In this, her story also shares one feature with that of Melanie Klein, who raised three children while training, and then practicing, as a psychoanalyst. Both women developed a body of creative work that draws deeply on the dynamic of mothering children. It is even possible that Klein was a figure of transference for Bourgeois: that the figure of the “woman artist” Bourgeois embodies draws on an analogy with that of the “woman analyst” created

by Klein. For if Klein's theories of the phantastic reality of the part-object and the death drive are useful in understanding Bourgeois's sculpture, it is not only because these theories became influential at a crucial moment in the development of her work—when the “father figures” of surrealism (and by extension psychoanalysis) seemed to demand rebuttal—or even because of the special explanatory power they hold in relation to Bourgeois's art. The neglected history that Kleinian theory makes it possible to summon—the history of child analysis and its interplay with feminism, the invention of the woman artist, and the emergence of art objects as part-objects—is also a history of transference, of the evolution of transference.

The test of any psychoanalytic theory—its interest, as François Roustang has observed—is that “it can be undone, first on a logical basis, and second on a fantasmatic level.”⁸ Surrealism showed that an artistic practice attempting to probe the unconscious is less inclined to confirm any psychoanalytic theory than to convulse it. By the time Bourgeois encountered surrealism in Paris in the mid-1930s, however, the movement had settled into a stable structure of masculine discipleship. Within the surrealist circles of Gradiva, as within the culture of Freudian psychoanalysis itself, the role of woman was to embody the unconscious, not to theorize it. For Klein, and later Bourgeois, to reconceive the unconscious theoretically or artistically therefore would mean undoing Freud—uncrowning the Oedipus complex—on a logical basis and on a phantasmatic level.

Bourgeois's art does this for surrealism, tracing phantasy to the part-object, to the mother, and *in* the death drive. But it also counters Klein, inventing maternal ambivalence as a psychic position of potential imaginative power. In this, Bourgeois's art extends the logic of Kleinian thought so far that another theoretical principle begins to emerge, that of the maternal death drive as the mother of ambivalence.

The material presence was there taking all that room and bothering me, bothering me by its aggressive presence. And somehow the idea of the mother came to me. This is the way my mother impressed me, as very powerful, very judging, and controlling the whole studio. And naturally this piece became my mother. At that point I had my subject. I was going to express what I felt toward her.... First of all I cut her head, and I slit her throat.... And after weeks and weeks of work, I thought, if this is the way I saw my mother, then she did not like me. How could she possibly like me if I treat her that way? At that point something



Louise Bourgeois, *The She-Fox*, 1985. Marble and steel, 70.5 × 27 × 32 inches.
Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Gift of Camille Oliver-Hoffmann.
Photo: Peter Bellamy.

*turned around. I couldn't live if I thought that she didn't like me. That fact that I had pushed her around, cut off her head, had nothing to do with it. What you do to a person has nothing to do with what you expect the person to feel toward you.... Now at the end I became very, very depressed, terribly, terribly, terribly depressed.*⁹

So Bourgeois recounts the process of making *The She-Fox* (1985), a black marble statue of a headless, multi-teated animal regally installed on a thick cushion of stone. The muscular haunches support a massive, canted upper body shorn of forelimbs and burdened with two pairs of swollen teats, spherical tumescent promontories rising toward a long vaginal slit in the elongated throat of the beast. Pocked with chisel marks, the stone's dark surface gleams at the throat where the pitted gash is laid. Surmounting the square solid neck is a polished block, planted firmly like a crown. At the foot of the statue, a miniature portrait is carved fetishlike into the hollow of the right haunch.¹⁰

Bourgeois's account of *The She-Fox* compares the aggressive presence of "the material" to a powerful maternal imago that commands the studio. Her description might be taken (might indeed have been adapted) from Melanie Klein's reports of the psychoanalytic play technique. For the role of the analyst, as Klein conceived it, was to provoke negative transference, or the transference of aggression, by constructing "total situations" in the analytic setting, where a complex of anxieties and phantasies could be played out.¹¹ (Remember Rita, the little girl who in the course of one session "blackened a piece of paper, tore it up, threw the scraps into a glass of water which she put to her mouth as if to drink from it, and said under her breath 'dead woman.'")¹²

In Klein's account, the beginnings of transference lie in the earliest months of life, in the vicissitudes of the drives. Transference therefore is not exclusively a displacement of sexual desire onto another, but a renewal of aggressive phantasy that targets, above all, the mother. "We can fully appreciate the interconnection between positive and negative transferences," she writes, "only if we explore the early interplay between love and hate, and the vicious circle of aggression, anxieties, feelings of guilt and increased aggression, as well as the various aspects of objects toward whom these conflicting emotions and anxieties are directed."¹³

In recent years, a sculpture closely related to *The She-Fox*, *Nature Study*, has often been installed at the entrance to exhibitions of Bourgeois's work. A similar figure can be seen in photographs of the artist's Brooklyn

studio, its distinctive profile assuming a totemic clarity in the vast space of a former clothing factory. The centrality of these figures in Bourgeois's late work seems to declare an affiliation with the maternal imago as, in defiance of patriarchal convention, a figure that sustains ambivalence and aggression: not only an object of ambivalence or a figure produced with the help of ambivalence, but a figure in which the creative power of ambivalence is lodged.

When we think of the institution of motherhood, no symbolic architecture comes to mind, no visible embodiment of authority, power, or of potential or actual violence.¹⁴

The emergence of the woman artist at the very moment when the death of the author was proclaimed has sometimes been interpreted as a theoretical regression, perpetuating the myth of the artist in another form. Bourgeois has countered this trend in a distinctly psychoanalytic way: by analyzing the transference. Since 1982, the moment of her designation as a feminist foremother, Bourgeois's sculpture has insistently returned to the mother—as a figure of anxiety and ambivalence.

Reclaiming ambivalence from the masculine Oedipal scene, Bourgeois's sculpture laces this emotion under the sway of the maternal-infantile relation, but also of the maternal subject. By Freud's account, ambivalence is passed from father to son, a gift with the help of which boys struggle to become men.¹⁵ Klein counters that ambivalence is born of the infant's struggle with the maternal body; the baby's capacity to tolerate ambivalence is, for Klein, formative for both sexes. In Bourgeois's art, beginning with the *Personages*, her first sculptures, ambivalence is bound up with the mother, but not only as the archetypal object of ambivalence she is for Klein. In sculptures such as *Portrait of Jean-Louis*, *Dagger Child*, and *Tomb of a Young Person*, where aggressive cutting doubles as apotropaic protection against such aggression, maternal ambivalence arises as a psychological position (in Klein's sense of the term) in its own right. For if *Portrait of Jean-Louis* stands as a warning against maternal rage, it might also be a symbol of the phantasmatic potential of maternal ambivalence, an emotion that, as the feminist psychoanalyst Rozsika Parker has observed, even psychoanalysis has not dared to theorize.¹⁶ Yet the maternal subject's heightened capacity for ambivalence—her ability not only to tolerate but to nurture this condition—is the very fulcrum of Bourgeois's art.

The iconic status of one figure in Bourgeois's late work, which she calls the *Spider*, declares the maternal imago as guardian of ambivalence



Louise Bourgeois, *Spider*, 1997. Steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric, rubber, silver, gold and bone, 177 × 262 × 204 inches. Private Collection, courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.

Photo: Rafael Lobato.

and keeper of the death drive. Constructed on an architectural scale, the towering steel *Spiders*, balanced on tapered legs, recall the precarious stance of the *Personages*. With their spindly limbs and burden of egg sacs, the *Spiders* evoke in particular *Quarantania I* (1947-1953). There, a figure from Bourgeois's first sculpture exhibition, *Woman with Packages*, stands poised on the sharpened tip of a slender pole, encumbered by wooden batons, heavy appendages suggestive of maternal obligation. Like the legs of the *Spider*, a circle of so-called *Shuttle Women* leans in to buttress the figure. Commemorating the women weavers who operated the looms in the tapestry works supervised by Bourgeois's own mother in Aubusson, on the banks of the Bièvre, the *Shuttle Women* preserve a defensive distance between figure and viewer. A résumé of Bourgeois's sculptural production of the 1940s—the war years and her first decade as a sculptor and a mother—*Quarantania* is also testament to the formative role of maternal ambivalence in her art.

Harboring a cage festooned with artifacts of the past—animal bones, scent bottles, remnants of tapestry, a pocket watch, a mirror, a chair—*Spider* (1997) portrays the maternal imago as a presence at once protective and menacing, magnificent and monstrous. This figure summons early phantasies of the child in confrontation with the maternal body, a body littered with the enigmatic traces of past life, a bodily presence that is both refuge and cell. In this it shares a familial resemblance to *The She-Fox*, a figure that is at once object and emblem of aggression. The *Spider*, however, is also suggestive of maternal phantasies of ambivalence; phantasies in which creative and destructive trends converge in the shadowy realm (in exhibitions, the *Spider* is almost always dramatically lit) of maternal anxiety.

It was Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), Jane Gallop has remarked, that brought maternal rage home to the feminist movement of the day.¹⁷ Rich tells the story of an evening spent with "women poets, some of whom had children," talking of poetry "and also of infanticide." The poets confessed "our own murderous anger at our children."¹⁸ For Rich, as for Gallop, maternal anger is a tragic symptom of patriarchal culture's "mind-body split," a violence in the symbolic order that fatally separates culture, history, and politics from "the realm of love and the body where mother carries, bears, and tends her children."¹⁹ In Bourgeois's art, however, maternal anger is less a pathology of patriarchy—a social ill visited on mother—than a manifestation of ambivalence to which patriarchal culture is blind. If, then, for Rich the distortion of aggressive fantasy into murderous rage, even murder itself, is an effect of the cultural prohibition on women's, and especially mothers', ambivalence, Bourgeois's art bears out this claim. But with this caveat: that the maternal ambivalence to which patriarchy is oblivious is the very mother of ambivalence. Portraying this ambivalence through the maternal body, but also through its objects, Bourgeois suggests that the mother who carries, bears, and tends her child expecting to lodge it in "the realm of love" suffers phantasies of failure, abandonment, and destruction that may in turn rebound upon the child. In defense of them both, she nurtures her own ambivalence, and that of her child.

In extremis, maternal ambivalence assumes the guise of mother death, a figure of the death drive turned against death. The *Spider* encompasses the aggression of the other in its own monstrous phantasies of maternity. With its inconceivably slender, articulated limbs, engineered for speed, the *Spider* holds fast, awkwardly poised on pointed feet, crouched over its cage. At the center of the enclosure, under the egg basket, sits an old armchair, an ample lap to receive prisoner or charge, an imposing throne

on which the maternal image might rest. Threaded with ambiguity, the *Spider's* nest holds the anxiety of aggression while holding it back.

Je ne me fatiguerai jamais de la représenter.
*I shall never tire of representing her.*²⁰

Notes

¹Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 211-212.

²Ibid., p. 211.

³Ibid., p. 212.

⁴Leon Bersani, "Death and Literary Authority: Marcel Proust and Melanie Klein," in Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁵Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, p. 212.

⁶Jane Gallop, "The Body Politic," in Gallop, *Thinking through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 93.

⁷Quoted in Eleanor Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 157.

⁸François Roustang, "On the Transmissibility of Analytic Theory," in Roustang, *Dire Mastery: Discipleship from Freud to Lacan* (1976), trans. Ned Lukacher (Washington: American Psychiatric Press, 1986), p. 59.

⁹Louise Bourgeois, taped interview with Jennifer Dalsimer, 4 September 1986 (Archives of American Art). Bourgeois offers a more detailed description of the piece in Jerry Gorovoy and Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi, *Louise Bourgeois: Blue Days and Pink Days* (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 1997), p. 176.

¹⁰"Then under her haunches is a kind of nasty place, and there I placed myself. That is to say I put a statue that used to be called Fallen Woman." Bourgeois, quoted in Gorovoy and Tabatabai, *Louise Bourgeois: Blue Days and Pink Days*, p. 176.

¹¹Melanie Klein, "The Origins of Transference" (1952), in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1986), p. 209.

¹²I discuss Rita's case in relation to *Femme couteau* in chapter 6 of Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

¹³Klein, "The Origins of Transference," p. 207.

¹⁴Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 274.

¹⁵Sigmund Freud, "Some Reflections on Schoolboy Psychology," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1964), vol. 13, p. 244. This text is discussed in chapter 1, Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*.

¹⁶Rozsika Parker, *Mother Love/Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 20. I discuss the relation of the *Personages* to maternal ambivalence in chapter 3, Nixon, *Fantastic Reality*.

¹⁷Gallop, *Thinking through the Body*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁸Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 24, as quoted in *ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁹Gallop, *Thinking through the Body*, p. 2.

²⁰Louise Bourgeois, "Ode à ma mère" (Ode to My Mother), 1995, in Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (London: Violette Editions, 1998), p. 321.

MICHELLE MORAVEC

Make Room for Mommy

Feminist Artists and My Maternal Musings

IN THE 1950S, FREUDIAN FEARS about “smother mothers” invaded the new medium of television. *Make Room For Daddy* (1953-1964), a sitcom starring Danny Thomas, focused on a comedian who struggled to balance family life and the entertainment business. The comedic aspects of this show derived from the reversal of roles created by Thomas’ frequent absences from the home. Viewers in the 1950s would not have seen the humor in a show called *Make Room for Mommy* since in 1955 less than 25 percent of married women with children worked outside the home.¹ Fifty years later, however, this premise could be pitched, not as a comedy, but as a reality show about most women in the United States. Just over 70 percent of married mothers work outside the home, but few women find the situation funny. Survey after survey—and there are a seemingly endless number of studies—show that making room for mommy is a difficult challenge for most women.²

You can hardly turn on the TV, pick up a magazine, or read a blog without entering into some debate about motherhood. Motherhood is where the rubber of feminist theory hits the hard road of reality. While I’m heartened by all the attention motherhood is getting, the historian in me realizes that our society periodically voices anxiety about the role of mothers when women’s status is undergoing profound shifts. That is perfectly understandable to me, since I am doing a fair bit of freaking out myself these days. After a decade of research and writing about motherhood, I had two children, in rather rapid succession, coinciding with my first tenure-track job.

Making room for the mommy in me has proved difficult, despite the serendipitous concurrence of my life and research. My fundamental understanding of myself—that I did not lose me when I gained my children—seems out of sync with the rest of society. I feel guilty that I never once considered quitting my job, an emotion fanned by the media,

which seems to rejoice in publicizing surveys that reveal most women with children who work outside the home would quit their jobs in a second if they could. I know in part that I enjoy the luxury of guilt-free employment due to vagaries of my personal situation. I finished my education and found a job in my field, before I had children. I have a partner who is not only devoted to our children, but is also an academic and thus enjoys the same flexible schedule I have. (By *flexible* I mean the ability to work long hours into the night, rather than between the hours of 9 and 5.) We have made do so far, but at some cost. Missed meetings, class scheduling so as to avoid the use of daycare as long as possible, unavailability for evening or weekend events, the presence of children on campus—all have drawn negative comments. It seems even the most liberal of institutions, those of higher education, still are not prepared to make room for mommies (or daddies for that matter).

When I am not worrying that I might metaphorically disappear, I spend my time writing while wearing earplugs so that I'm not distracted by the sounds of my children. The very time for research is stolen from the seemingly endless cycle of domestic chores. I am like a demented hamster on a wheel, never getting anywhere but exhausting myself nonetheless. I know enough to know these years are so fleeting, that soon enough I'll have all the quiet and solitude that I crave, but I cannot put that on my tenure-and-reconstructing document. So every weekday morning I answer the same question: "Do you stay home or go to work today?" I pry my son's little hands off my neck as he begs to stay home with me and send him off to daycare so that I can write, in this case, ironically, about the difficulties combining motherhood and feminism.

I do my little bit to correct the record. (I am a historian after all.) During my life-as-literature search, I came upon Lauri Umansky's fine work, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties*, and my idea for a scholarly piece about motherhood began to emerge.³ Umansky offered a valuable analysis of the role of motherhood in 1970s feminist rhetoric, but I wanted to show that what feminists *did* was as important as what they *said* about motherhood. I began thinking about a seventies feminist performance art group, Mother Art, about which I wrote my first published article. As a mother now, my relationship to the material felt different. My interest was piqued by the way the members of Mother Art constantly negotiated their own multi-faceted identities as feminists, as artists and as parents. As an historian, I appreciated the way members of Mother Art took what were all-too-often simplistic bumper-sticker style feminist slogans and enacted them in public spaces to alter perceptions of motherhood. The mother



*Mother Art Group Shot, 1976. Publicity photograph for the second *By Mothers* show.*

in me understood their achievements were all the more remarkable for the barriers they had to overcome. Perhaps the best-known motto of the women's movement is "sisterhood is powerful." The familial metaphor imbedded in this mantra reveals a great deal about the movement itself. Young women framed their activism as part of the larger generational rebellion occurring in the 1960s. The mother-daughter relationship of staid 1950s families was left behind to forge bonds with sisters in the feminist movement, yet that left little room for feminists who were themselves also mothers.

That sad reality was made clear for the original members of Mother Art. The women met in the early 1970s at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, California.⁴ The Woman's Building was intended to provide a supportive community for women artists, but women with children often felt unwelcome. Suzanne Siegel, a founding member of Mother Art, remembered that dogs were allowed in individual artists' studios, but not children.⁵ Laura Silagi, who also participated in Mother Art from its inception, recalled that one of the teachers at the Woman's Building, childless herself, blatantly stated that you could not be a mother and an artist. Gloria Hadjuk, another long-time member of the group, had expected to find support for herself as a single mother, but instead became disillusioned by the hostility she felt from some members of the organization.⁶ Because there were so few women with children at the Woman's Building, the mothers gravitated towards each

other, and in 1974 Mother Art emerged from their conversations about motherhood and feminist art.

In September of 1974 Mother Art created the *Rainbow Playground*, which literally made room for mothers and their children at the Woman's Building. Silagi explained that the *Rainbow Playground* was as much a political statement as it was a practical resource for mothers: "it was a way of asserting that the ideal of feminism needed to include childcare and a place for children, because children are part of society and women's lives and that you can't really divorce that fact from being a woman, being a feminist and being an artist."⁷ Physical space for children took on added significance at a location like the Woman's Building, which existed because female artists felt excluded from male-dominated art institutions. Devoting a space for children alongside the "room of one's own" that initially inspired the Woman's Building was an important first, albeit symbolic, step in supporting artists who were mothers.

"The personal is political" is another well-worn catchphrase of the women's movement. Coined by radical feminists to indicate that intimate relationships are constructed by forces beyond our personal choices, the "personal is political" also reflected the issues that feminists saw as appropriate for a social movement to address. In the earliest years, these topics encompassed everything from the drudgery of housework to women's orgasms, but rarely extended to an analysis of motherhood. The members of Mother Art faced intertwining myths about motherhood and art that made it seem almost impossible to combine the two roles. Today the dominant discourse about women and work is framed in terms of balance, but in the 1970s the primary question for artists was far more fundamental. As Suzanne Siegel recalled, "in the early seventies some feminists considered being both a serious artist and mother to be in conflict." Mother Art challenged the notion that the roles of mother and artist were mutually exclusive. Once women cleared that hurdle, they still faced a tradition of male art history that limited depictions of mothers to the sentimental Madonna with child or the martyred mother of the *Pietà*. Instead, Mother Art argued that women's depiction of motherhood was appropriate content for serious art. Finally, Mother Art recognized the ambivalence many women felt about motherhood and argued that those feelings should be explored in women's art.

In 1975 and 1976, the members of Mother Art organized two exhibitions aptly titled *By Mothers*. On the most simplistic level, *By Mothers* illustrated that mothers made art. However, a month of workshops accompanied the exhibition to explore the various questions raised about combining motherhood and art. The topics of these workshops presaged

feminist writing about motherhood that emerged over the next decades: analyzing depictions of the mother in mainstream art history, exploring women's experiences of motherhood, discussing how to combine motherhood with women's other roles, looking at mothering as a feminist activity, and of course, daycare.

The announcement for the second *By Mothers* show expressed the deeper intent of these exhibitions. Mother Art was committed "to taking the private, personal aspects of the traditional female experience of nurturing and making it the valid content for our public art."⁸ Like the noted theorist Adrienne Rich, whose influential *Of Woman Born* was published the year of the second *By Mothers* show, the members of Mother Art recognized that this artwork would include negative as well as positive aspects of motherhood.⁹ In their call for submission to *By Mothers*, Mother Art encouraged work that explored "the pain, anxiety, anger and guilt of mothers" in addition to "the delight, the strength, the care in nurturing."¹⁰ While many of the pieces in *By Mothers* included images of mothers and children, always a popular subject for art, they differed dramatically from the sentimental portraits common to art history. In describing the images, Silagi characterized them as "grotesque, not sentimental ... ironic ... opposed to anything romanticized ... humorous, although some of them are very sweet." Suzanne Siegel produced a graphic piece that interwove statements about her role as a mother and as an artist. Gloria Hajduk created *Application for Prospective Mothers*, which de-romanticized motherhood by posing a series of thirty questions to prospective mothers as if they were applying for employment.¹¹

Initially Mother Art focused on gaining greater visibility for mothers who were artists. In a second phase, the group began using the figure of the mother as trope through which to explore the devaluation of women's contributions to society. In 1977 Mother Art received funding from the California Arts Council for *Laundryworks*, a piece timed to a wash-and-dry cycle that was performed in laundromats.¹² In *Laundryworks*, the members of Mother Art entered the laundromat, put an item in to wash, strung a clothesline across the room and hung individual artworks from it.¹³ While the task of cleaning clothes might be mundane, the members of Mother Art sought to alter perceptions of this experience. As Siegel recalled, "We were interested in the work women do in the home that is not acknowledged. We wanted to put that private activity into public space."¹⁴ In order to create a dialogue, Mother Art created a pamphlet, published in English and Spanish, that they distributed to patrons during their performances.¹⁵ The *Laundryworks* pamphlet posed twelve ques-



Laundryworks, 1977. Inside a performance of *Laundryworks*.



Laundryworks, 1977. Suzanne Siegel and her piece.

tions about the experience of doing laundry. Some questions pondered the more profound aspects of this everyday chore, such as “what in your life could the different cycles of a washing machine (soak-wash-rinse-spin-dry) be compared to?” Other questions were humorous, such as “when you look inside of a machine before putting in your clothes, what do you expect to find?” and “do you ever have the urge to put an obnoxious child through a short rinse cycle?” As Mother Art developed as a group, pieces like *Laundryworks* sought to broaden understanding about the role of mothers.

Laundryworks and Mother Art became a *cause célèbre* in 1978 during debates in Los Angeles over Proposition 13, a ballot proposition to reduce property taxes. The *Los Angeles Times* cited the funds given by the California Arts Council to Mother Art as an example of wasteful government spending.¹⁶ Ronald Reagan, then working as a talk-show host between his stint as governor of California and his election to the presidency, derided *Laundryworks* as an effort to bring culture to housewives by staging plays in laundromats.¹⁷ Members of Mother Art were angered particularly by the implication that women doing laundry did not deserve or need exposure to culture. The attack galvanized the group. While Mother Art’s early artwork focused on making the personal political, Mother Art now became overtly political. In two performance pieces, *Mother Art Cleans Up the Banks* and *Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall* (1978), Mother Art attacked the sites they saw as the real locations of government waste.¹⁸ Playing off “both a verbal and a visual pun about the role of women as purifiers and domestic sanitation workers of the work,” Mother Art “cleaned” these sites with brooms, mops and dusters.¹⁹

Politics also drove Mother Art’s next series of performances, which focused on abortion. The members of Mother Art feared that young women lacked an understanding of life before *Roe v. Wade*. *Not Even If It’s You* (1981) explored the many situations in which women would find themselves unwillingly pregnant under illegalized abortion. The title of the piece neatly summarized the way Mother Art hoped to personalize the debate about abortion. Not even you, even if you think it justified, will be able to obtain an abortion if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned. Subsequent pieces on this theme, such as the *The Museum of Illegal Abortions* (1981), explored quite graphically the reality of illegal abortion by displaying the implements women had used in the past to induce abortion, while *Freedom of Choice* (1982) used the Statue of Liberty as an image of American freedom to make an ironic comment on the lack of freedom women would face if abortion became illegal.



Abortion Cabinet, 1981. Installation from the Museum of Illegal Abortions.

While a focus on abortion rights might seem odd for a group that initially formed around motherhood, Mother Art understood efforts to legalize abortion as part of an effort to cast all women as mothers. Although Mother Art celebrated women's role as mothers and valued women's work as mothers, they never lapsed into an essentialist position that framed all women as potential mothers.

The last official Mother Art piece occurred in 1985.²⁰ *Dining Room Table* commemorated the founding in March of 1967 of Another Mother for Peace, an anti-war group, at the dining room table of Barbara Avedon.²¹ Another Mother for Peace sought to end the war in Vietnam through a variety of strategies. The organization coined the slogan "war is unhealthy for children and other living things," organized a consumer boycott and worked to elect anti-war candidates. Deborah Krall, who joined Mother Art in 1980, explained "[w]e loved the idea of her [Avedon] working from her dining room table. Women could be powerful from within the home." The installation of *Dining Room Table*, which occurred in several venues, mixed images of domesticity, such as toys and coffee cups, with the tools of political activism, like a typewriter and letters to politicians. *Dining Room Table* summed up the themes Mother Art's work had addressed over the preceding decade, raising awareness of women as powerful people in society who are able to combine multiple roles, in this case motherhood and political activism.

If my life were a Mother Art piece it would be what I have come to think of as the Rollercoaster of Motherhood. A rollercoaster, not a modern, steel-framed amusement park version, but a rickety wooden one like those at a cut-rate carnival, that creaks round and round, as the mommy doll lurches first upward before a momentary pause and then a fall into speed-filled freedom. I ride that emotional rollercoaster of motherhood every day. At one moment I am exhilarated by a class that went particularly well or a key insight into a research project, and the next second I fall into the pit of guilt. On any given day, I'm pushed over the top by my fear that I am not a good enough—fill in one of the following—teacher/scholar/colleague/friend/wife/mother. At the same time I am angered that I worry so much about fulfilling the expectations and needs of others at the expense of myself. If I have learned anything from the members of Mother Art, or feminists of the 1970s in general, it is that I must exploit this contradiction, not avoid it. So I write articles like this one that allow me not only to function as a scholar, but also to muse about motherhood in a way that will hopefully be beneficial to other mothers.

Notes

¹Prior to 1970, the labor force participation rates of never-married mothers with children were not published in reports by the United States Government. This data is derived from Sharon R. Cohany and Emy Sok, "Trends In Labor Force Participation of Married Mothers of Infants" *Monthly Labor Review Online* 130, no. 2 (February 2007) <<http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2007/02/art2full.pdf>>

²For a recent review of some of these studies see Ruthanne Pioreschi, "Career Women Find Balancing Hard: Working Mothers Miss Out on Children's Growth" (May 2, 2007) <http://feminism.suite101.com/article.cfm/duality_of_womens_roles>, accessed May 24, 2007.

³Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* (New York: New York University, 1996).

⁴Original members of the group included Christy Kruse, Helen Million, Laura Silagi, and Suzanne Siegel. The membership of the group fluctuated over the years. Only Siegel and Silagi remained in the group for its entire history. Gloria Hajduk, who joined the group in 1976, and Deborah Krall, who joined in 1980, remained active the longest. A history of the Woman's Building can be found on their website, www.womansbuilding.org.

⁵Suzanne Siegel, interviewed by the author, 2 October 1992, Woman's Building Oral History Collection, the Woman's Building. All quotations attributed to Suzanne Siegel are taken from this interview unless otherwise noted.

⁶Gloria Hajduk, personal correspondence with the author, circa July 2002.

⁷Laura Silagi, telephone interview with the author, 17 July 2002. All quotations attributed to Laura Silagi are taken from this interview unless otherwise noted.

⁸Mother Art, "Second By Mothers Show, July 17-August 14" (unpublished flyer).

⁹Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976).

¹⁰Mother Art, "Second By Mothers Show".

¹¹Gloria Hadjuk, *Application for Potential Mothers* (unpublished pamphlet and artist's statement, c. 1976).

¹²By 1977, Mother Art was comprised of Suzanne Siegel, Laura Silagi, Helen Million-Ruby, Gloria Hajduk, and poet Velene Campbell. Information about *Laundryworks* is based in interviews with Siegel and Silagi as well as Dennis Hathaway, "Mother Art: Victim of California Carving Knife" *New World* 4 (1978): 21 and Jan Alexander-Leitz, "Laundromat as Art Gallery" *Ms.* (March 1979): 20.

¹³For example, Gloria Hajduk's piece played with the parallel notions between the wash cycle and life cycles. Suzanne Siegel created a Xerox series that transitioned from a clear image to one almost completely faded, equating colors fading in the

laundry and the invisibility of women's work. Helen Million, another founding member of the group, showed photographs of women doing laundry and of the actual items that each woman laundered. Laura Silagi created an ironic image of washing photos of water. Velene Campbell, who joined Mother Art in 1976, created random poems composed with words silk-screened onto pillowcases.

¹⁴"Revisiting Mother Art," *Crania* 11 (1998) <<http://home.roadrunner.com/~lrsilagi/Crania/crania/issue11/motherart/motherartarticle.html>>, accessed May 24, 2007.

¹⁵Mother Art, *Laundry Works* (unpublished pamphlet, c. 1977).

¹⁶W.B. Rodd, "Legislators Search for Ways to Cut Fat and Don't have Far to Look," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 June 1978.

¹⁷Ronald Reagan, "Waste," transcript of broadcast, KABC (29 November 1978). Files of Laura Silagi.

¹⁸Mother Art, "Mother Art Cleans Up ... The Banks ... City Hall," *High Performance* 1, no.32 (1978).

¹⁹"Mother Art Cleans Up..."

²⁰Although the members of Mother Art officially stopped collaborating in 1986, Deborah Krall, Suzanne Siegel and Laura Silagi once again joined forces in 2000 for *Running Out of Time*, an installation piece that addressed the dichotomies of middle age.

²¹In 2003 this group was restarted to protest United States involvement in Iraq. For details of its history see "Another Mother for Peace" <<http://www.another-mother.org/history.html>>

MÓNICA MAYER

¡MADRES!

ON JUNE 23, 1983, MARIS BUSTAMANTE and I formed *Polvo de Gallina Negra* (*Black Hen's Dust*), the first feminist art group in Mexico.

After leaving art school, Maris had been part of *El No-Grupo*, one of the most important artistic collectives in the seventies, and the first one to center its production exclusively on performance art. I, on the other hand, having studied at art school in Mexico and becoming involved in the women's movement, had recently returned from participating in the Feminist Art Program, a two-year course at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles.

By the 1980s, both Maris and I had participated in several collaborative projects with other women artists and were interested in forming a feminist art collective. We organized a meeting with many colleagues who had participated in these projects, to invite them to form a group. Except for photographer Herminia Dosal, who was part of the group for a while but left because she was not interested in performance art, none of the other women joined us, for all sorts of reasons such as "I won't be able to get a boyfriend if I am identified as a feminist" or "Collective work was part of the '70s."

The objectives of *Polvo de Gallina Negra* were (1) to analyze women's images in art and in the media, (2) to study and to promote the participation of women in art, and (3) to create images based on our experience as women in a patriarchal system, with a feminist perspective and with the goal of transforming the visual world in order to alter reality. To achieve this, our work would have to take whatever shape was necessary and we needed to reach large audiences. Our strategy was humor.

No one can say we weren't ambitious (or modest), but we also knew what we were up against, so we chose a name to reflect this. *Polvo de Gallina Negra* (Black Hen Powder) is a popular remedy against the evil



Manifestación: Performance during an abortion demonstration in Mexico City, 1991.
Maris Bustamente (left), Mónica Mayer (right).

eye. We believed that in this world it is difficult to be an artist, all the more so to be woman artist and it is almost impossible to be a feminist artist, so we selected a name that would protect us.

Our first event was the performance “*El Respeto al Derecho al Cuerpo Ajeno es la Paz.*” It took place during a demonstration against violence against women on October 7, 1983, at the Juárez Monument in Mexico City. It was based on the famous phrase of President Benito Juárez (1806-1872), known abroad as the Abraham Lincoln of Mexico, “Respect of the right of others is peace,” which we changed to “Respect of the body of others is peace.”

During the performance we prepared a potion to inflict the evil eye upon rapists. The ingredients were things such as: twelve dozen eyes and hearts of women who accept themselves as such, three tongues of women who don’t become submissive even when they have been raped, thirty grams of powder of voices that demystify rape, a sprinkle of supportive legislators, etc., and it was distributed among the audience. The recipe was later published in several magazines and feminist appointment books and has been dramatized twice on television.

Polvo de Gallina’s most ambitious project was ¡MADRES!, which literally means “mothers,” but is also an expression that can be loosely translated as “Holy shit!”

It happened between 1984 and 1987 and, as several of our pieces, it

took very different shapes. At the time we defined these types of work as Visual Projects. In them we integrated life, art and politics and disregarded traditional definitions of art. We were particularly flexible about time. Thus, a project could be a tour of 30 performed lectures in the State of Mexico or something like ¡MADRES!

The first thing we did as part of our in-depth research for ¡MADRES! was to get pregnant. Naturally, we had the help of our husbands, who were both artists and as such understood our intentions perfectly.¹ Obviously, as feminists we had daughters, and our scientific accuracy was such that my daughter Yuruen and Maris' daughter Andrea were born only three months apart in 1985.

¡MADRES! was integrated by several sub-projects. I will try to describe them as best I can, but since a very important part of our work is playing with language, popular sayings and specific political situations in Mexico, I'm afraid some of it might be lost in translation.

Liberté, Egalité, Maternité: Polvo De Gallina Negra Ataca de Nuevo (Strikes Again)

For seven months (it was a premature birth), we mailed a total of seven art pieces on different aspects of motherhood to a list of 350 artists, feminists, friends and media.

Letter #1: *Mother's Day: Do You Know Where Your Mother Is?*

This letter included the *Polvo de Gallina Negra* formula to summon the Mother Archetype, which led the reader through a humorous guided fantasy in search of their own personal Mother Archetype, understood in the Jungian sense as "the self-portrait of an instinct." We claimed that true feminist art needed to break all chains, including those of thoughts and affections, conscious and unconscious.

Letter #2: *Brief History of Those Who Tried the Milk Before Buying the Cow*

I think the above title roughly translates the name of this letter, which was *Breve Historia de las que se Comieron la Torta Antes del Recreo*, a saying that applies to women who get pregnant before marriage. The letter had a page with texts on both sides. One had positive feelings on motherhood such as: "by having a daughter I recovered my mother" and the other, negative ones: "My only power is screwing my kids." Each phrase was attributed a color. The letter also included a plastic bag with confetti with these colors as a context for fragments of texts in which we pondered the fact that men had created the image of what we consider

feminine and the impact of this on the images of Mother Archetype in different cultures.

Letter #3: *Epitaph*

On one side of the paper Maris drew silhouettes of animals through which you could see her face in mourning. It had a text that read: "My father is dead; like me, my children will say: my mother is dead." Mine had two layers. The first asked who the epitaph was for: "women who die giving birth or those who kill themselves because they didn't want to be a mother, or because they weren't able to become a mother, or those that kill their kids, or those that die from clandestine abortions, or lose their lives while saving their children...." Under the first layer was the image of my mother with a text about her suicide and a photograph of me and my young daughter hugging.

Letter #4: *On the Mystery of Conception or How to Stir Up Accumulated Sperm*

This letter celebrated the fact that we were the only group that believed in "*el parto por el arte*" ("birth for art's sake") instead of believing the more common "*el arte por el arte*" (art for art's sake"). The letter included the script for a performance we would undertake as soon as our work as mothers, housewives and teachers allowed us. The script was based on the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who first appeared to Juan Diego, an Aztec native in the fifteenth century. She asked him to pick some flowers, which he collected in his cape. When he notified the incredulous ecclesiastical authorities of her appearance, he was able to prove his story by opening the cape in which he carried the flowers and showing the image of the Virgin imprinted on it. In our performance we were supposed to appear with our backs to our audience, our hands on our breasts. As we turned slowly, the audience would see we were pregnant as we lifted our aprons like Juan Diego did his cape. As we let down our aprons, tons of hens, lizards, houses, pots, snakes, fingers, volcanoes, diapers, gold coins, flowers, children's scissors, corn, grapes, and two dreams would flow out.

In the end we asked the art recipients to share with us what they thought would be the best image on the apron of two pregnant feminist artists.

Letter #5: *Mother Wars: The Triumph*

This letter told the story of the pubic wars, where our descendants Mar-Is and Moni-Ka finally, in the year 5364, win the war we started against



Mother Wars, Letter #5 of the mail art series "Egalité, Liberté, Maternité, Polvo de Gallina Negra Ataca de Nuevo," which was part of ¡MADRES!

the Mother Archetype. We talked about a social process that went from Matriarchy, to Fratriarchy, to Patriarchy, to Childarchy.

Letter #6: *Beyond The A-Vanguard: Transmaternity*

This letter was dedicated to activist Rosario Ibarra, whose son was taken by the Government in the early seventies and never returned. Now a senator, she has fought bravely for decades against political repression.

In this letter we defined transmaternity as something that happens when motherhood takes us from the domestic realm to the political arena. We named Rosario Ibarra the highest representative of transmaternity.

Letter #7: *La muerte nos vale madres* (We don't give a shit about death)

The Mother Archetype. Life and death. No one ever received this letter, at least in their lifetime.

Letter To My Mother: A Competition

We organized a competition for anyone, regardless of nationality, age, sex, sexual preference, race, religion, class, education or occupation to write a letter with everything they always wanted to tell their mothers but were afraid to say. We received 70 submissions from all over the country. We had an award ceremony at the Carrillo Gil Museum on November 7, 1987. The winner of the best letter, Nahum B. Zenil, received an art work from my concurrent exhibition at the museum, and we raffled another work among all the participants, each of whom got a signed diploma for their participation.

Mother for a Day

¡MADRES! allowed us to understand that the basic problem of Patriarchy is the absent-father syndrome. We decided to “show men the true and only road to authentic fatherhood by granting them the possibility of becoming Mother for a Day.”

Six men deserved this honor for their intelligence, charisma, leadership and good looks. One of them was anchorman Guillermo Ochoa, who invited us to his prime-time, internationally broadcast, high-rating news program, *Nuestro Mundo*, to give him his award.

Wearing our enormous paunches with aprons (which made us look very pregnant), we carried a ventriloquist's doll that sported an eyepatch like Catalina Creel's (the infamous mother in a very famous soap opera that was running in those days), which we used to teach us how to be bad mothers. We dressed Ochoa with his own apron, transforming him into a pregnant woman, and named him *Mother for a Day*. Ochoa joined in the fun and performed beautifully with us. He swallowed the pills we gave him to make him feel morning sickness and proudly wore his crown as queen of the home. The audience immediately responded: the men were deeply offended, but the women enjoyed it.

This performance has continued with a life of its own. Nine months after the show took place, someone from the audience called Ochoa's



¡MADRES! Performance during the TV program, *A Brazo Partido*, conducted by Marta de la Lama, Channel 13, in 1987, with the participation of Maris Bustamante, Mónica Mayer and our daughters, Yuruen Lerama and Andrea Valencia.

program to ask him whether he had given birth to a girl or boy. As time goes by, we find more and more young artists who tell us they remember seeing this performance as children. Some of them weren't even born yet when the program aired.

We continued *Mother for a Day* in our performance piece at the Carrillo Gil Museum discussed below. Several male friends had told us it was unfair that so few of them had been granted the privilege of being a mother, at least for a day, and so we generously decided to include them.

¡Madres! The Mythical Meeting Between the Sierra Madre Oriental and the Sierra Madre Occidental

This performance before an audience at the Carrillo Gil Museum on October 30, 1987, brought us together as the Venus of Turin and the Venus of Sombrerete in an effort to make two great mothers, the Sierra Madre Oriental and the Sierra Madre Occidental (the two main mountain ranges in Mexico), come together. Turin and Sombrerete were the streets we were living in. The invitation itself was a conceptual piece. It was a questionnaire to measure the real and unequivocal influence of motherhood. We asked things such as: Does motherhood teach you

about life? Is it beautiful? Is it a pain in the ass? Is it an illness? A vocation? Is it mental?

During that performance, Maris and I signed a contract whereby if she died before me, I would spread her ashes in the Pino Suarez metro station (the most crowded one in Mexico City) at noon on a Friday or else, if I died first, she would spread mine at the Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres, the place where famous men are buried, which at the time included no women. Today it is called the Illustrious Persons Monument, so we'll probably have to change our agreement. Life and death.

The Poems Are Also Pink?

As our friends got involved with the project, they started proposing their own activities. One of them was a poetry reading on motherhood. On October 23, 1987, at the Carrillo Gil Museum we had the privilege of having poets Carmen Boullosa, Patricia Vega, Magali Tercero, Enriqueta Ochoa, Angélica de Icaza and Perla Schwarts read their own work and Alma Sepúlveda read a selection of poetry by other women.

¡MADRES! On Television

We were invited to the television programs of Marta de la Lama and Patricia Berumen and combined the interview format with performance. By that time our daughters were about a year old, so we would take them with us to show how chaotic life can be with toddlers. I particularly remember Maris in one of those interviews, placing a fake tummy on her head and explaining that, just as Leonardo Da Vinci had said art was a mental thing, she claimed so was motherhood.

Novela Rosa O Me Agarró El Arquetipo

This was the title of the exhibition I had at the Carrillo Gil Museum in September 1987, which housed several of our events. I presented 14 series of mixed medias on different aspects of the Mother Archetype.

Our last performance was at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. The main action of that performance was Maris sawing a plastic tummy off me. She didn't have to wear a paunch, because the performance took place the day before Neus, her second daughter, was born. She had enjoyed the experience of motherhood so much the first time around that she decided to close the project by repeating it.

During that performance, we decided to become a completely endogamous group and the only ones allowed in would be our direct descendants. Only our daughters or granddaughters would be entitled to become members of *Polvo de Gallina Negra!*

As time went by and a new generation of women and men started growing up accustomed to feminist ideas, somehow or other I began saying that all our children could be part of the group. Recently, Adán, my firstborn, heard me say this at a lecture and afterwards complained I had always said it was an all-girls club. I denied it vehemently. I couldn't believe I had ever been so sexist! I couldn't understand how, if I had always claimed that feminism concerned both men and women, I could have left my own son out! He went to the documents and, of course, proved me wrong. We have since amended the rule.

Notes

¹Maris was married to Rubén Valencia (México 1950-1990) until his death. He was also part of the *No-Grupo*. I am still married to Victor Lerma and since 1989 we have been collaborating on a long-term art project called *Pinto mi Raya*.

MARIA ASSUMPTA BASSAS VILA

S.O.S.

Searching for the Mother in the Family Album

SOME SPANISH AND ITALIAN WOMEN philosophers and historians who were involved in social and political movements during the nineteen seventies have realized that they were the most “anti-maternal” generation.¹ They not only rejected the “family of the father” where women, as Luce Irigaray describes, were exiled, but they also turned away from relationships with their mothers and many rejected biological maternity.² To the historical suppression of the mother, there was added what Milagros Rivera has pointed to, the severing of any dialogue between liberated women and their own individual mothers.³ In her book *Mujeres en Relación: Feminismo 1970-2000*, Rivera wrote: “In the twentieth century, the ideology of liberation and emancipation, necessary for transforming extremely unjust social relationships born out of modern western imperialism and rampant industrialization, also swallowed up a daughter’s relationship with her mother. It was a terrible loss.”⁴

In fact, for those of us who have inherited and enjoyed the social conquests and models of female freedom from the 1970s, our relationship with our mothers remains an issue that causes us both conflict and confusion, often remaining concealed within the realm of intimate relationships. The legacy of the women’s movement of the 1970s offered us a greater margin for making different decisions about family relationships and it was the key for the development of new family realities in western societies. However, we have also realized that our desires were not limited to political or social changes. We want to live and reframe our relationships using a different logic, what we like to call a “non-instrumental relationship.” Feminist thought on sexual difference has brought into focus this key question for women and feminism, highlighting the importance of recovering and rethinking the relationship with our own personal mother as a political practice. To acknowledge our mother produces what we call a “cut” away from the patriarchal social paradigm (*un corte en el*

orden simbólico patriarcal) and makes present the symbolic order of the mother in our life and in the world.⁵

In this text I have attempted to write about these “cuts” in works of the 1970s and 1990s that dealt with the family portrait through conceptual and post-conceptual approaches. The works discussed were produced by Fina Miralles, Eugènia Balcells and Cori Mercadé, three artists born in Catalonia (Spain) to whom I am grateful for the many conversations we have had through the years.

IN THE ABSENCE OF THE MOTHER, IN THE SHADOW OF THE ALBUM

Women’s rebellion against “the family” at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s in Spain emerged in a very particular context. On the one hand, “family discourses” were the key motifs of Franco’s dictatorship and its particular politics of repression, which sought to control women and women’s sexuality. “Homilies on the family” by the Catholic Church also played a key role in placing the nuclear family as the model, turning the heterosexual relationship into a moral issue and defining motherhood as women’s destiny. Ideological and political control through “the family” didn’t stop suddenly with Franco’s death in 1975. These ideas have continued to model frames of life in successive generations, during the so-called period of democratic transition (1976-1980), and they survive today. At the same time, second-wave feminism and particularly the important intervention of women in movements advocating social change and a political transition to democracy also played an important role. For a large proportion of feminist women of that first generation, “the family” was the patriarchal institution par excellence from which women had to escape in order to create new ways of understanding sexual difference and relationships.

There is a generation of Catalan women artists that grew up at the end of Franco’s last repressive period in power and who started their careers in the early 1970s. They were involved in local and international avant-garde scenes, both in and outside the country, and most worked with conceptual approaches and sought a new language for artistic production. Although the feminist movement did not have a direct impact on them, many have acknowledged in interviews that they took sexual difference into account in their projects and individual works.⁶ In their production during the 1970s and early 1980s, alongside their interest in social questions, they also highlighted the “family issues” as a bridge between certain biographical and social questions and were well aware of their own relevance as political and symbolic subjects. These works

are not well enough known in either Spanish or international conceptual histories and yet they could make an important contribution to rethinking the meaning of the personal as political. Analysis of these artists' works would modify and enlarge the current historical narratives on conceptual art in Catalonia, which has to date been characterized by a strong masculine social and political bias.

Matances (Slaughters, 1976-77) by Fina Miralles, born in Sabadell in 1950 and now living in Cadaqués, makes many critical statements on the family model inherited from the Franco era in Spain, at a mature moment in her conceptual body of work, which started in 1972, when she began exploring relationships between natural elements, her body, cultural representations and the uses of nature (1972-1974). In 1974, with *Images of the Zoo*, Miralles went deeper in her analysis of human relationships to concentrate on representations meant to manipulate persons and animals. *Matances* is the culmination of that line of research and is focused on the physical and psychological death produced by manipulative relationships. Alexandre Cirici, one of the few Catalan critics who have closely followed the development of conceptual art in Catalonia, wrote that it was an interesting "social" or rather "sociological" analysis of power relationships.

Matances is made up of a series of collages and photocompositions and was exhibited in 1977 at Barcelona's "G" Gallery, a pioneering venue for the presentation of conceptual and new art practices. On that occasion, the work also included an assemblage entitled *Diviértase matando (Have Fun Killing)* in which cutout silhouettes of a man-target were arranged and the viewer was invited to take a dart from the figure's male genitals and throw it at another to explode a small firework. The installation was completed by a video documentary consisting of a series of linked fragments showing: the process of slaughtering a pig, which had been a common practice amongst peasants in Catalonia; the to-and-fro movements of a dog shut in an apartment; and images of urban spaces and buildings from along the route the artist used to take as a girl from home to school. The gallery was filled with a strong smell of ether, which may have played a part in the work's powerful suggestion of dissection. There was also another object that required interaction with the visitor: a toy dog with a nodding head, very popular at the time, which was accompanied by a sound piece heard through headphones in which the definition of "dog" from the *Catalan Encyclopaedia* was translated into several languages. The collages and assemblages that formed the core of the work included newspaper photos documenting the brutal repression of the last years of the Franco regime and the rituals it staged. There were also a large

number of pictures of animals, caged, wounded or dead. Some of these photographs had formed part of Miralles' earlier installation *Images of the Zoo*, while others were cutouts of reproductions of dead animals by the roadside, which the artist placed beside postcards from different places in Europe. The presence of violence and death was intensified by a bird's feather and a fox's skin added to two of the collages.

There were also several apparently more innocent images in those panels. I refer to those of a girl being dressed by a middle-aged woman. Those images came from an artwork that Miralles had produced earlier called *Standard* (1976). It was a performance work addressing the construction of the female body as an object of sexual use and commercial exchange. Slides of women from publicity and media alternated with images of a girl being dressed by a woman, step by step, as if she were a mother dressing the girl to go to school.

In *Matances*, we also find several disturbing photographs of a woman's head covered not only with a mantilla—the veil women had to wear to go to Catholic church during Franco's regime—but with a stocking, a sheet of plastic and other materials. These were pictures intended to make up a separate work called *Emmascarats (Masked Men)*, (1976), which was never shown independently.

Collage compositions also included words and phrases like *Death, Justice, Fear, Wounded, Make your mark* or *Seeing is not being alive*, written graffiti-style with either pencil or spray paint. Beside these were maps of Spain, the symbol of Franco, the victor, reproductions of paintings like Goya's *Executions of the Second of May* and some of the many images of the crucifixion of Christ, as well as other drawings. These compositions were organized around a central motif in either three horizontal lines or two vertical ones on wide rectangular pieces of cardboard.

As I said in the introduction, the family had become a space of ideological discourse in Spain during Franco's regime. Miralles' images of the artist and her family from her private album share the same space with images of women from newspapers and magazines. Across these images, we see women performing rituals that they had to learn in school, in compulsory social service, in the church and in other different educational institutions. We have to remember that there was an explicit "doctrine" on femininity in Franco's Spain. There was a written doctrine on what a spouse was, what it meant to be a wife, on appropriate relationships between couples, on sexual relations, on relationships with your own sex and on sexuality. It is also important to note that public representations of women from Franco's regime were visually constructed to reproduce this transmission of ideological values. For example, many images show

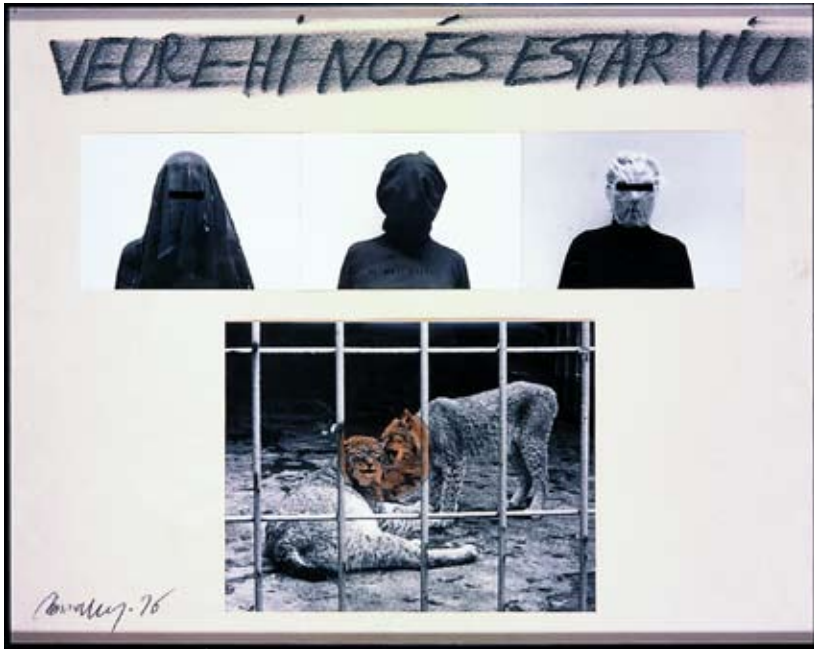


Fina Miralles, from the series *Matances*, 1977. Photographic collages 51.5 cm × 66.5 cm.

Top: *España (Spain)*,
Right: *Entre baionetes (In between bayonets)*.



Fina Miralles, *Images of the Zoo*, 1974. Installation, dimensions variable.



Fina Miralles, from the series *Matances*, 1977. Photographic collages
51.5 cm × 66.5 cm. Top: *Veure-hi no és estar viu* (*To see is not to be alive*), 1976.
Bottom: *Per l'impunitat de la por* (*For the impunity of fear*), 1977.

women dressed only in white and whiteness became a metaphor of purity, of “the healthy against the unhealthy,” in a situation in which the unhealthy people were those who had lost the war: the communists, anarchists, or leftists. Women were often represented in the media wearing uniforms. The uniform became a metaphor of service to the homeland, to their husband, to their sons, to their men. Their open smile combined with a gaze into the darkness suggested how women should always be ready to work happily for the ideals of the fascist society. The Spanish writer Carmen Martín Gaité has offered a detailed study of these correspondences in *Usos amorosos de la postguerra española* (Amorous Customs in Post-War Spain, 1987).⁷

Beyond this ideology and its systems of indoctrination, the family photographs included in *Matances* have also led me to explore the private nature of family life as it occurred and evolved amongst bourgeois Catalan families in that period. It has been difficult to find historical and social research on these family relationships. However, many novels by women authors of that period focused on those experiences.⁸ In my interviews with Fina Miralles and other women artists of the same generation who were from a similar social class, they have told me that they experienced family life as a context in which violence occurred at many different levels: in silences, in an absence of communication, in the distance between parents and their children, in an authoritarian education, in abuses of power and sexual mistreatment. The “pictures” of the family are not represented in any direct way in their work. However, I have noticed that in *Matances* the family photographs, particularly those in which we see the artist as a baby or as a young girl, are often positioned as objects or targets for different levels of violence. In this sense, we could also understand *Matances* as a between-the-lines reading of the family album in-so-far as the violence that the artist documents in the public sphere also suggests the latent violence in the family sphere.

Matances is not only about entwining the public and the private sphere in its analysis of the social—if it is true that it makes visible different kinds of power relationships and the violence that is lived and inherited by Miralles’ generation in post-Franco Spain—but it is also, for me, a raw and bloody exposition of the logic of violence on which the system of relationships is structured in the patriarchal symbolic order. Miralles’ mother appears in one of the family photographs with her children as if this was the only safe space in the midst of many images of physical and psychological violence. With her mother’s visual presence perhaps Miralles is pointing to the possibility of non-manipulative (instrumental) relationships. However, the shadow of the “family of the father” is om-

nipresent in this work and the artist's relationship to her mother is here unreadable at a symbolic level. It is interesting to note that her desire to reconstruct her relationship to her mother played a very important role in much of Miralles' later work, after she stopped producing conceptual work and began unfolding painting into space and then producing paintings which deal with different levels of visual reality.

Beginning in the 1950s, Hollywood was a major manufacturer of new family stereotypes that were propagated for political purposes. During various periods of "opening up" during the Franco regime in the 1960s and early 1970s, these American representations of the family joined those produced in Spain. Eugènia Balcells, an artist who also belongs to the generation of conceptual artists in Catalonia, created several works that explore and record the reception and dissemination of these models in the cinema, advertising, photo-novels and the mass communication media in general.⁹ In her installation *Re-prise* (1976-77), in her book and exhibition *Fin (The End)*, (1978), and her film *Boy Meets Girl* (1978), the artist accumulates film stills and other cutouts of pictures from magazines and photo-novels. She orders and projects them in accordance with the basic structure of the film industry's standard screenplays: the beginnings of films, the key images of the female lead and the male lead, how boy meets girl, first kisses, engagement scenes, happy endings and so on. The end result offers us an "X-ray" of the patterns between woman and man, of different relationships between couples, of love and happy families. In a nutshell, she appropriates and repeats the type of relationships that were produced and reproduced ad nauseum by the narratives of the commercial cinema and means of communication. As always happens in Balcells' work, the simplicity of the script not only reveals the caricatural nature of these models but also finally "cleans" our perception, and therefore unleashes the potential pictures have to evoke, intertwine and multiply into much more fertile stories. For example, at the end of *Boy Meets Girl*, the random meetings of feminine and masculine images finish up pairing off boys with girls, girls with girls, close-ups with full-body pictures, and so on, provoking interesting displacements, surprises and changes of perspective that would be at the origin of new creative forms for conceiving the narration of human relationships.

IN THE SHELTER OF THE FAMILY ALBUM: RECOVERING THE "GRANDMOTHER" AND THE "SISTER"

Whereas Balcells was mainly concerned with media images in many of her works, there is one piece from the 1970s in which the artist explores

images more directly related to her own private life. I am referring to the film *Album* (1976-78), which she made on her return to Barcelona after a long period living in the United States, where she had completed her training and experienced the “buzz” of the 1970s New York art scene. In *Album*, she films, from the first page to the last, her grandmother’s album of postcards that Balcells often used to look at as a child.

The album of postcards is a characteristic version of or complement to the family album, especially at a time when the postcard still performed a function that would later be served by travel photography. In this way, the postcard album became the receptacle of personal recollections where the postcard is the “souvenir” of a journey, but also, like the letter, it is the object that displays something of the subtle and elusive world of personal relationships, some of which, especially for women, did not have space in the most stereotyped representations of the “official relations” recorded in the family album.

Album is mainly a documentary on one object but it underlines the interest albums have as objects in themselves. Once opened, the contents of the pages are gradually impregnated with a deliberately literary and romantic tone: postcards of different European cities, of spas frequented by the wealthy bourgeoisie, the calligraphy of the grandmother’s handwriting, the signature and the messages written in the margins. These pictures are accompanied by a background recording of the music of Richard Strauss and the voice of Balcells’ grandmother, Eugènia Gorina, reading some of the fragments of the postcards. The camera films from a fixed, static viewpoint, clearly establishing the presence of an observing eye, while the magic of the album unfolds before the viewer like a magic spell. The film invites us to unveil the potential of a living relationship with objects and images, but it also reconstructs the artist’s relationship with her grandmother and thus exhibits a link that reveals a female genealogy within the family.

In another work, *Album portàtil* (*Portable Album*, 1991), a performance staged by Balcells in the Tartessos bookshop in Barcelona, she presented another female genealogy, a “portrait of a second family” by both men and women artists through the ages, designed to visualize their personal and cultural references. In the case of women, in view of their “exile” within the typical patriarchal family, this difference in emphasis has a special significance. The work consists of an overcoat with plastic pockets containing postcards of pictures of different women: film stars, intellectuals, writers, historical women, scientists and others less well known. Swathed and at the same time armored in this second skin, Balcells strolled naturally and proudly through the main hall of the bookshop.

I relate this work to an important number of works that begin in the 1970s with the aim of representing and naming a female creative genealogy, in order to understand women's historical role as producers of culture and claiming their legacies, the legacy of half of humanity, made invisible by the patriarchal culture. Two well-known examples are Judy Chicago's emblematic *Dinner Party* (1974-79) and Mary Beth Edelson's *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper* (1972). These works explicitly highlight both the exclusion of women from the tradition and the symbolic and political importance of these relationships of recognition among women themselves. Relationships between women show us the existence of relationships in history that are not structured around "fathers." Although feminism often invoked "sisterhood" as a model for this genealogy, where family relationships are constructed through women's relationships, the concept of "sister" has been heavily contested within feminism because it did not give enough importance to what we now call the "disparity" between women, which doesn't mean differences (of social class, sexuality, race) but a relationship with a personal mother as a point of departure for a new genealogy. However, since this important moment in feminism, relationships between women have always been fundamental for women as a means to create new political practices. We are more and more aware that our freedom originates when we create and work out relationships with women from what we have called relationships of "affidamento" and/or "female authority."¹⁰ Female authority displaces relationships from the sphere of power to reframe them as a means of validating confidence.

BUT WHAT HAPPENED WITH "MY MOTHER"?

A few years ago I read *The Symbolic Order of the Mother* (1991), in which Luisa Muraro, an Italian philosopher at the University of Verona, describes her own process of recovering a dialogue with her mother, which transformed her philosophical practice. The maternal symbolic order is not a metaphorical or symbolic representation of the mother understood in the abstract as a generative principle, but the practice of what she establishes and what she gives us when we acknowledge her in the real origin of our life and as the first teacher of language that helps us to give names to things. Chiara Zamboni, a thinker of the female philosophical community *Diótima*, has written:¹¹ "In entering the world, we receive from our mother the gifts of life and language. These two gifts cannot be separated: in entering the world we are born into language."¹² The link with the mother is simultaneously biological and symbolic. It instigates

a principle of a non-instrumental relationship that cuts across the often conflictual and loving relationships that exist in each particular case, but does not push these difficulties aside. It also goes beyond the variables that have existed in the mother-son or the mother-daughter relationship as seen from the perspective of social relationships and places in question the central thesis of interpretations from psychoanalysis.

Luisa Muraro called the “maternal symbolic order” the practice of relationships that maintain the significance of this maternal origin and recreate the principle of relationship that is established with the mother.¹³ This principle is not a moral order, nor does it represent a duty. As Zamboni explains, it can be understood through the logic of the relationship that arises when, for example, we receive a gift: we do not feel obliged to give anything in return because the transaction is not an exchange, but we feel linked to the person who has given it to us, and if we want to maintain the relationship on the same lines “we have to express our gratitude or give something.”¹⁴ Recreating the dialogue with the mother is thus as important for women as for men, because it represents a restitution of the mother in the human genealogy and in particular the possibility of recovering the dialogue, as Milagros Rivera wrote, “on the foundations of life and human coexistence.”¹⁵

Balcells’ *Album portátil* differs from the American proposals of the 1970s I have cited because she does not point to a patriarchal referent (like the *Last Supper*) to evoke the symbolic but to her own female body and what we can consider an “ornament”: the coat or dress that shows it off. A number of women writers and thinkers have studied the interesting and controversial relationship between the ornament and the female body in the West over the centuries. Milagros Rivera interestingly concludes her contribution to this debate by highlighting the relationship between ornament and the maternal symbolic order: “the feminine ornament is a language that dialogues with the origin of the female body and its root in the world, with its source of strength in life; a language that expresses admiration and love for the maternal work. It forms part, therefore, of the symbolic of the mother, a mother who has given life and has also taught us, her daughters, to speak—so that when we were little girls we did not feel ‘naked.’ (That is to say, she has guaranteed, during the early infancy of each and every one of us, the order of the world, the coincidence between words and things.) This taste for self-adornment is a feminine inheritance that reminds us that it is she—the mother—who is the creator of the body, the vessel and image of human existence.”¹⁶

At first view, Cori Mercadé’s work *Natura Morta* (*Still Life*, 1996) seems to deal with themes far removed from what could be the celebration

of the maternal and its gifts. The subject of this work is death, memory and the relationship between the “time of painting” and the “time of mourning” as the artist defines them. However, as I will attempt to show, to acknowledge the mother as an origin of life and the fundament of culture and therefore civilization does not mean to deal necessarily with images of the maternal body.

Cori Mercadé, born in Barcelona and trained at the School of Fine Arts at the University of Barcelona, is one of the few Catalan women artists who have worked continually on family portraits and family life issues in a post-conceptual language of painting. Works like *Tondo o la quadratura del cercle* (*Tondo or the Squaring of the Circle*, 1995) on the cultural construction of the representation of maternity, or *Compte enrera* (*Countdown*, 1997), a series of 52 gynaecological and obstetric instruments painted in oil day by day during the final period of her last pregnancy, demonstrate her approach. The latter work alludes to On Kawara and includes a circular painting representing “paternity.” In *Sang i caritat* (*Blood and Charity*, 2001) she explored one of the classical virtues which was habitually represented as a matron with two children. Starting out from painting, Cori Mercadé’s work customarily explores what happens between the lines, for instance between displacement through painting, photography and video. Her project proposes an increased consciousness of the processes of perception and comprehension that we habitually perform automatically. With this in mind I read the frequent displacements in the work as movements towards a symbolic order of the mother.

Natura Morta begins to unfold as a kind of album of absences. We see photographic portraits of dead people next to oil paintings on landscape themes. Photography and painting (portrait-landscape) unfold in an ordered manner on the wall where they are displayed together, recreating overall a new, serene chromatic landscape before the viewer’s eyes.

The photographs are taken by the artist at cemeteries from the photos that are placed at gravestones. What leads the artist to “appropriate” these particular pictures? What relationship does she establish with each picture, and through them with the people that are shown there who she does not and has never known? Is there morbidity or indecency in this gesture that seems to intrude into such a private ritual? Who or what is the landscape for?

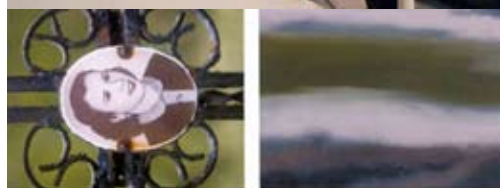
Mercadé’s work tells us nothing about the people or their histories beyond what the pictures themselves show us. The portraits from seemingly private family albums are displaced in these public spaces. Mercadé has observed these photographs in her frequent walks through cemeteries



Eugènia Balcells, *Album*, Super 8 (1976) 20' / 16mm (1978) 11'. Color, magnetic sound.



Eugènia Balcells, *Album portàtil*, 1993. Object (special coat made with transparent flexible plastic sewn with nylon thread, 66 postcards).



Cori Mercadé, *Natura Morta (Still Life)*, 1996. Installation view and (left) detail. Oil on canvas and framed photographs, 58 panels, 24 × 37 cm each.



Cori Mercadé, *Tondo o la Quadratura del círculo (Tondo or the Squaring of Circle)*, 1995. Installation, oil on wood, 10 panels at 110 cm.

and her work grows out of a particular and specific relationship that she establishes with their faces. She often does not know their names. The relationship begins when she selects a number of particular portraits from among the many she has seen and continues with her attentive, prolonged and particular observation of each picture in her studio. This observation is primarily an analysis of the picture, but it does not reject an emotional relationship with it nor with the person it represents; at the same time, it does not allow the picture to intervene by superimposing upon it a content that would shift our attention away from its qualities as an image.

The relationship she seeks rests on how to maintain an intersubjective dialogue, not a monologue, with the image, but it is the picture that provides the framework for this, each with its own guidelines. Starting from the range of colours and other features she observes in each portrait, Mercadé paints an oil landscape by hand. Each photo is thus accompanied by a painting and each portrait has a landscape beside it. These landscapes lie between figuration and abstraction, naturalism and symbolism. They are images that condense something of the singularity of the initial image, a singularity that has been filtered through the artist like a sediment left after decantation.

This process of creating distance from the portrait seems to entail the dissolution of an original sense, but paradoxically it makes it clearer than ever. Each landscape seems to be a commemoration of the singular deceased person, and further still it seems to exist and to be there to honour the nature of a singular relationship between the artist and her subject. The painting, or rather what the artist calls “the time of the painting,” also gradually unfolds the time spent relating to that image and to the person whom the image represents. Portraits in cemeteries are signs that revive the physical memory of a relationship, the singularity of a face with regard to the abstract and the unknown that death represents in western lay culture.

Situated, then, in “the time of the painting,” each unit (photographic portrait/oil landscape) seems to be a decomposition of the classic approach of background against figure, which painting up to and after Cubism has debated, as well as between reality and representation, knowledge and language. On the one hand, each photograph is a “still life,” a symbolic object in the framework of the landscape. Mercadé knows and is interested in the history of the genre, specifically how the “still life” signals themes of reflection on life and death, on pleasure and morality. The objects are symbolic and mark a contemplative *tempus* for the painting. They define it as a space where looking means searching for the mean-

ing of materiality, of the body and of life itself. On the other hand, the landscapes overtly recall the tradition of German Romanticism, that is, a painting that is also made up of reflections on finitude and infinitude and the understanding of being in relationship with nature. The landscapes that accompany the photographs in this work by Mercadé are inhabited by no one, but situated beside the portraits, they also become a kind of horizon where the anonymous face seems to take root and become more concrete, closer and somehow more accessible to the viewer.

There is something in this work by Mercadé that makes me think of the figure of Antigone as portrayed by María Zambrano. The Spanish philosopher transforms the ending of Sophocles' tragedy in two powerful texts: "The Delirium of Antigone" (1948) and "The Tomb of Antigone" (1967).¹⁷ Antigone, immured alive, speaks to the protagonists of the tragedy from her tomb and watches the knots of her social and family history coming undone.¹⁸ For Zambrano the tomb is the "space and time" where awareness of her innermost feelings symbolically germinates, and what emerges as transcending this experience "is only visible at certain moments, at others it is not seen and it is never seen in full." Through Zambrano's words I have understood that Antigone does not appeal to any authority when she decides to bury her brother Polyneices and disobey the laws of the city dictated by the tyrant Creon. Antigone is imbued with the authority given to her by the recognition of her maternal origin. The burial of her brother and the dedication of a funeral rite continue the task of care and respect for the body and for life. Like Antigone's, Mercadé's work is also a gesture of gratitude and love for the work of the mother; it is a practice of the maternal symbolic order.

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Notes

¹María Milagros Rivera Garretas, *Mujeres en Relación. Feminismo 1970-2000* (Barcelona: Icaria, 2001).

²Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

³Victoria Sau, *El vacío de la maternidad. Madre no hay más que ninguna* (Barce-

lona: Icaria, 1995). This short book was very important for me when I began to study feminism in our country, because it offers explanations on the invisibility of a feminine legacy. Its goal is to present evidence of the disappearance or, as the author calls it, “the phagocytation” of the mother in language and in the two traditions that largely make up Western culture: the Judaeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman.

⁴Rivera, *Mujeres en Relación. Feminismo 1970-2000*, 19.

⁵See Luisa Muraro, *El orden simbólico de la madre* (Madrid: horas y Horas, 1991).

⁶Interviews were made by the author with Fina Miralles, Àngels Ribé, Silvia Gubern, Eulàlia Grau and Eugènia Balcells.

⁷See Carmen Martín Gaité *Usos amorosos de la postguerra española* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1987). More recently, the Catalan writer Maria Mercè Roca wrote monologues from interviews that she made with women of the same generation from different social and cultural backgrounds on issues of family and sexuality. See Roca, *El món era a fora. L'educació sentimental de las dones catalanes durant el franquisme (The World was Outside: The Sentimental Education of Catalan Women during the Franco Years*, 2001) which shows how women created different ways of negotiating with those “feminine” roles inside and outside the family and with the “doctrine” on women made by fascists so they were able to find ways to live on their own terms.

⁸For instance, Esther Tusquets, *Correspondencia Privada* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2001).

⁹See the artist's website: www.eugeniabalcells.com

¹⁰Duoda, “Les relacions d'autoritat i la llibertat” in Duoda, *Revista d'Estudis Feministes* (Center of Women's Studies of the University of Barcelona), no. 7 (Barcelona: University of Barcelona, 1994).

¹¹Diótima, *Traer al mundo el mundo. Objeto y objetividad a la luz de la diferencia sexual* (Barcelona: Icaria, 1996), 225-252.

¹²Chiara Zamboni, “La vía simbólica en la relación materna y el cortejo de las imágenes del ‘yo’ in Duoda, *Revista d'Estudis Feministes* (Center of Women's Studies of the University of Barcelona), no. 19 (Barcelona: University of Barcelona, 2000): 89.

¹³Luisa Muraro, *El orden simbólico de la madre* (Madrid: horas y Horas, 1991).

¹⁴Chiara Zamboni, “La vía simbólica en la relación materna y el cortejo de las imágenes del ‘yo’ in Duoda, *Revista d'Estudis Feministes*.

¹⁵Rivera, *Mujeres en Relación. Feminismo 1970-2000* (Barcelona: Icaria, 2001).

¹⁶María Milagros Rivera Garretas, *El cuerpo indispensable. Significados del cuerpo del mujer* (Madrid: horas y Horas, 1996), 67-68.

¹⁷María Zambrano, “The Delirium of Antigone” (1948) and “The Tomb of Antigone” (1967) in *Senderos. Los intelectuales en el drama de España. La tumba de Antígona*. (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1986), 201-265.

¹⁸Elena Laurenzi, *María Zambrano. Nacer por si misma* (Madrid: horas y Horas, 1995), 55-76.

BARBARA T. SMITH

The Coffins

Xerox Books

I KNEW DEEP INSIDE THAT my marriage was in trouble.

Despite years of therapy, spiritual breakthroughs and learning to pursue my own work as an artist, I knew an irrevocable schism had occurred that our marriage could not sustain.

Divorce was not a part of my plan, personality, or upbringing. I simply could not face it. I had made a vow and under no circumstances could I revoke it.

But another part of me could feel the promise was gone. That part was like a somnambulant sleepwalker who carried out the artworks that followed as if in a dream.

I had recently traipsed over to Gemini GEL, the internationally famous lithography studio, to present my idea for a print I hoped I could make there. I was naïve. I was told that it was not possible because I had no dealer, it was very expensive and I was basically unknown. Besides, Joseph Albers was currently printing there. It was a shocking comeuppance and I was miffed. I reasoned that lithographs were a 19th-century print medium. This was the 20th century. The print medium of our time was the business machine.

Historically, printmaking has evolved in each era from the mass media of the times. It has been used as an inexpensive way to communicate with the masses, in many cases to people who cannot read. In the hands of artists the medium becomes an art form. Witness Daumier with newsprint and lithography.

But now in my view lithography was obsolete (not the least of this idea was due to the fact that I had just been spurned).

I resolved at once to find out which of the business machines was technically the most advanced and researched various copy machines, e.g. 3M, ditto, and blueprints. I found Xerox to be the only one which was entirely new.

Xerox would print an image of 2-D or 3-D objects when placed on the glass plate by an *electronic charge* that configures the *toner* in the exact pattern of the material to be copied. The toner is made of tiny beads of *plastic* that become *charged* as the *light* scans the glass plate. The paper is then passed beneath a heating unit where the toner slightly melts (is *scintered*) into the paper and forms a permanent bond. This was completely new. The ink is neither pressed into the paper by force as with etching and engraving (intaglio) nor spread or stamped onto the paper like lithos, or serigraphs or wood blocks (planar). It is *semi-melted* into the paper.

I was thrilled and leased a big (914) Xerox machine that was put into my dining room. It immediately took over my life. While I had developed preconceived ideas of what I would do, the thing itself was so full of potential and options that I worked every day. I did not get around to my initial plans until a few days before I gave the 914 back. I could not seem to stop. I printed word texts with imagery. I replicated all manner of objects. I made visual stories, and stacks that in specially designed plastic bases became small sculptures. I made series that became large framed pieces. I wrote in lipstick on the glass, and I made images of my body, face, and hands, which became forerunners of my body-oriented performance work. I could not stop.

I began to have heaps of assorted prints all over my dining room and no clear idea of what they were or how to present them.

There was a deep undertone in some of the groups of prints. I had engaged Jerry McMillan, an artist photographer whose studio was near mine, to photograph my children for this project. Somehow I knew the photos would be part of this work. I then used these images in many different ways. A certain set were even dye-cut with four different types of circular holes.

As I made this work, especially the work with my children's images, I was gripped by a state of deepest grief, which I could not even acknowledge. What was it about my children that exacted such a price?

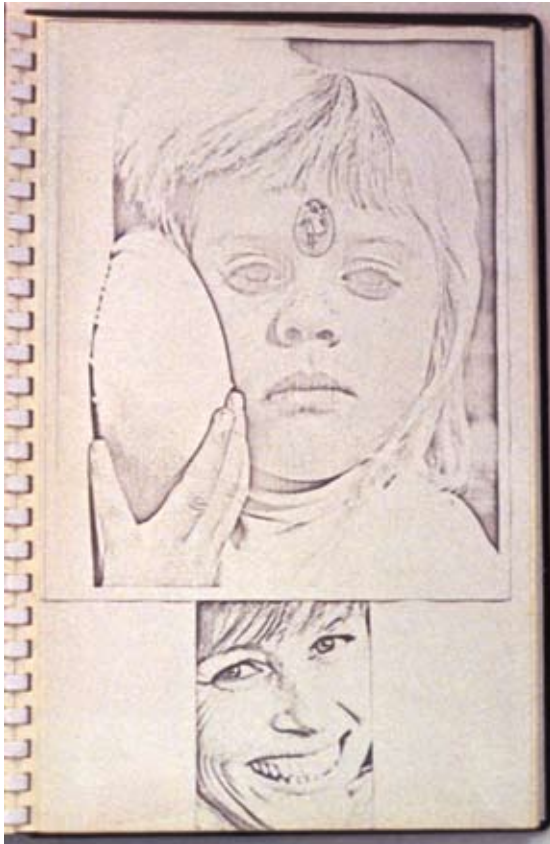
Soon I had even more piles of printed paper and realized they were books. Books are physical artworks that have to be held to be seen, which is an action, rather than mere passive viewing. They are intimate and personally engaging as art.

Once I found the bookbinder I could work with, I had to design my covers. I already knew what they would be. They were coffins. I could hardly bear it. The covers were all black, and except for the book with the children all bore a common logo on the cover. It was a circle with a cross within it embossed in silver in the center of each cover.

THE COFFINS



Bond, 1966. Xerox book, 12 × 8 inches.



Bond, 1966. Xerox book, 12 × 8 inches.

To me this represented that point in space and time when you reach an impasse that leaves no options. It is like a death sentence of impossibility.

Everyone hits these places from time to time. They are completely intractable and life only goes on by giving up. That is where I was.

It could not be put in words. What could not be said is in the artworks, the books. I was going to lose my family. It would never be the same. These books were coffins and memorials at once.

The cover of the book with my children was somewhat different because it makes such a beautiful pun on the issue of paper and pain and my kids and life itself. On this cover the word BOND is embossed in silver. My children, Richard, Julie, and Katie, are bonded to me and to each other. Maybe that is all that endures now. All the rest ARE coffins.

The strange thing is that the idea I had for a print at Gemini back then was that of a gravestone, a print of a stone made on a stone with a flower pressed between them.

I did not actually get a divorce until 1968. It took that long and was as if it was a dream that was happening despite me.

Note:

These were some of the first Xerox artworks ever made. Now, of course, the computer is *the* dominant machine. All the works are black and white; no color existed at the time. But I did find all sorts of colored papers, vellum, and acetate, etc., on which to work.

JENNIE KLEIN

Visualizing Maternity in Contemporary Art

Race, Culture, Class

IN “THE LONELIEST BIRTHDAY GIRL,” Monique Truong recalls her desire for a birthday cake that was just like the ones that her classmates brought to school on their birthdays. A Vietnamese refugee newly resettled in a tiny town in North Carolina, Truong wanted nothing more than to fit in with the rest of her elementary school classmates, who mercilessly picked on her because she looked and acted different. The mothers of her classmates sent in cakes made from boxes and canned frosting. On Truong’s birthday, her mother also brought in a cake. Much to Truong’s horror, her beautiful mother, raised with the tradition of French *patisserie*, showed up with a three-tiered, elegantly decorated cake that had nothing in common with the routine Betty Crocker cakes that her classmates shared. Only in retrospect did it dawn on Truong how difficult it must have been for her mother, a political refugee in a tiny town in the American south, to make this improbable cake for her child. Truong concludes that “normal life, with its celebrations, its photographs, and its cakes and candles, had to begin again sometime.”¹

Right up until the formulaic ending, Truong’s story, published in the pages of *Parents Magazine*, is compelling. In the past several years, mainstream magazines such as *Parenting*, *Parents*, and *Good Housekeeping* have included stories that reflect the changing demographics of America. Truong’s story, which narrates her mother’s experience of estrangement from the foreign culture in which she found herself, rewrites the 1970s to include an alternative image of mothering that was premised upon difference rather than sameness. Truong reads her mother’s cake as representing the resumption of normal life. But what is normal? And how could life in a small southern town in the U.S. ever compare to life in Vietnam? Rather than suggesting the resumption of normal life, the *patisserie* cake becomes a subtle act of rebellion, an assertion of difference that reads more like an act of creative resistance than an attempt

to fit in with the other box-cake-making mothers. The *patisserie* cake, itself a product of French Colonialism in Southeast Asia, is transformed into a gesture of anti-assimilation.

In “The Loneliest Birthday Girl,” this gesture of anti-assimilation is one that is narrated by the daughter rather than the mother. From *The Jazz Singer* (1927, starring Al Jolson), whose Jewish immigrant mother did her best to keep Jolson from becoming a jazz singer, to Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989, made into a movie in 1993 starring Ming Na) about immigrant Chinese mothers, the trope of the immigrant mother caught between the old country with its traditional ways and the new country with its modern ways has been trotted out with some regularity. These immigrant mothers seldom speak from a position of authority or even from any position at all. As Katrina Irving has argued in her book *Immigrant Mothers: Narratives of Race and Maternity, 1890-1925*, “enshrouded always within an extremely prevalent sociological analysis that stressed the difficulties many immigrant women in particular had adapting to American culture, the nurturing immigrant mother emerges as diffident within her family and unacquainted, or uninformed, by the broader social arena.”² Indeed, even today, language, cultural, and class barriers make it difficult for the immigrant to fit into a foreign community of mothers. Pranee Liamputtong has pointed out in her study of immigrant Thai mothers living in Australia, that many of the women that she interviewed stayed home with their children and had limited access to the outside world due to modest education levels and poor command of the English language. As a result, motherhood is even more important to these women, who focus their energy on their children.³

This essay is about the work of artists who, like Truong’s mother, are outsiders looking in, mothers who experience maternity from the edges of mainstream American culture. Unlike Truong’s mother, whose identity is constructed by her (assimilated) daughter, these artists aggressively take control of their representation and presentation as mothers. Two of these artists—Patricia Cué and Youngbok Hong—are immigrants themselves. Gail Rebhan is the descendent of a Jewish family that immigrated to the United States from Europe. Myrel Chernick, the only artist included here whose work is not autobiographical, becomes the “voice” for a woman whose social class precluded her membership in the motherhood club. For these artists there is no resolution that results in the resumption of “normal” life. Images of mothers, most of them archetypal or stereotypical, are ubiquitous in popular culture and art history. What is missing is the representation of the lived experience of being a mother from the vantage point of the outsider. What does it mean to be a mother from

the wrong class, wrong religion, or wrong race? bell hooks has argued that the margin can be a site of radical possibility and resistance.⁴ How can representation best capture the contradictions between iconic and ideological representations of motherhood and the actual experience? This is probably the most pressing question for the artists whose work is considered here. What unites these artists is their desire to tell stories and give voice to experiences at the margins of motherhood.

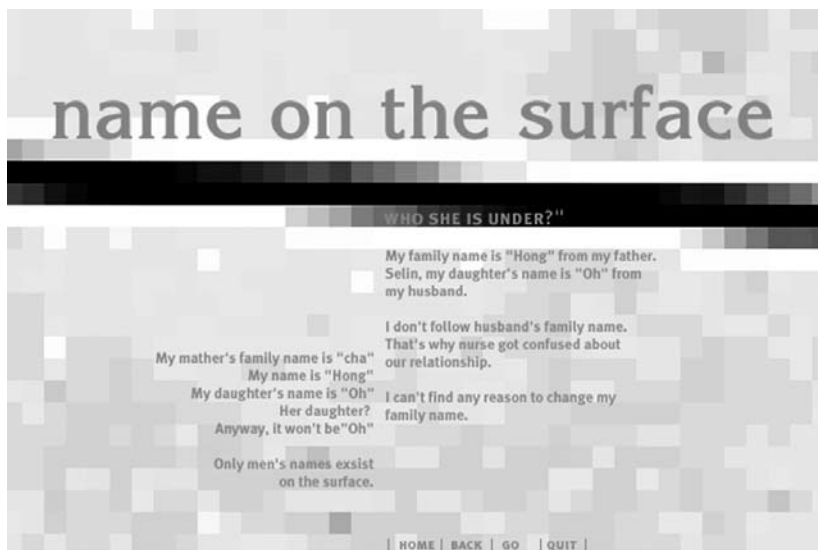


Youngbok Hong, *What She Carries*, 2002. Interactive computer piece.

YOUNGBOK HONG, *WHAT SHE CARRIES* (2002)

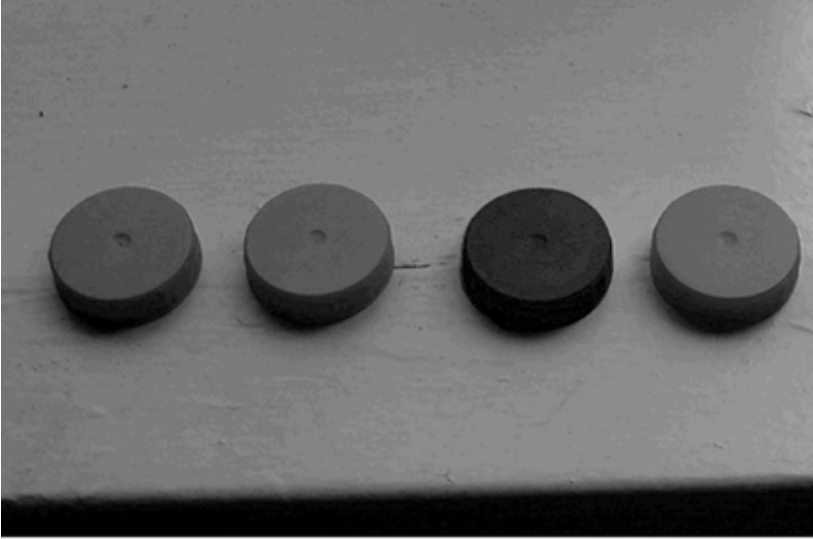
Many years ago Trinh T. Minh-Ha wrote that a fine story “neither wraps itself in a cloud of oratorical precautions, nor cocoons itself in realist illusions that make language the simple medium of thought.... S/he who speaks, speaks *to* the tale as s/he begins telling and retelling it. S/he does not speak *about* it.”⁵ Born in Korea and currently living in the United States, Youngbok Hong, like Monique Truong’s mother, has had to live between two cultures, two languages, and two identities. In *What She Carries*, an interactive computer piece from 2002, Hong tells the non-linear story of her mother’s visit from Seoul for the birth of her baby, a girl. Throughout the piece, a combination of short videos and text, the meaning of the title changes and shifts, as Hong deconstructs the idea

of what it means to “carry” something. “Truth,” Trinh writes, “is both a construct and beyond it; the balance is played out as the narrator interrogates the truthfulness of the tale and provides multiple answers.”⁶ *Who* is carrying something? *What* is she carrying? What does it mean to *carry*? Hong’s piece, activated by the viewer who must click on the mouse in order to advance to the next frame, travels through various truths and stories. The first “she” is Hong’s mother, who comes from Seoul to visit Hong and her husband in Chicago. Hong’s mother carries condiments—seaweed, hot pepper flour, sauces—that she has been preparing all her life in Seoul. “She” is also Hong, who carries a name other than that of her husband or her mother and who carries her baby girl. And “she” is Hong’s daughter, who “carries” the expectations of American femininity (pink everywhere for the baby shower) and a name that is different than the one carried by Hong.



Youngbok Hong, *What She Carries*.

Particularly compelling is the way in which the web-based format of *What She Carries* uses an overlapping narrative. Upon opening the piece, the viewer has three choices in the form of three small circles. Each circle leads to a different story. The menu at the bottom of the Web page allows the viewer to navigate through the site differently each time. These non-sequential stories are a reflection of Hong’s oblique relationship with Korean and American culture.



Youngbok Hong, *What She Carries*.

Although raised and educated in Korea, Hong pursued an MFA in Chicago and presently teaches graphic design in the American Midwest. Hong's story, spoken and written in her second language, reflects her distance from the culture of her mother; her mother's importation of Korean condiments in her suitcase and her aversion to letting her son-in-law see her smoke seem foreign to Hong. At the same time, Hong is not entirely comfortable with her adopted American culture. The pink things that proliferate around the birth of her daughter—pink balloons, pink clothes, and pink blankets—are bewildering to Hong, who is still familiar with Korean customs associated with the birth of the baby. Hong foregrounds her discomfort with American culture by making a conscious choice to use her English—grammatical mistakes, misspellings, and all. For Hong, there is no “normal” resolution of the cultural contradictions that inform her experience of motherhood.

PATRICIA CUÉ, *BUNDLE OF JOY* (2004)

Like Youngbok Hong, Patricia Cué has grappled with what it means to be a mother in a culture that is foreign to her own. Raised in Mexico and presently living in the U.S., Cué found herself taken aback when she had her first child at the age of 39 while living and working in Ohio. *Bundle of Joy*, the book that Cué made about her experience as a new mother,



Patricia Cué, *Bundle of Joy*, Abycendum Press, 2004. Portfolio bound book, 15 folios, 7.5 × 15 inches. Letterpress, laser prints and machine stitching on Arches paper.

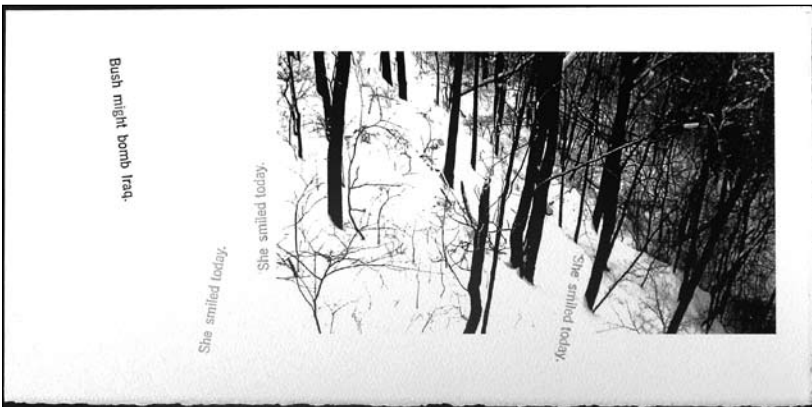


Patricia Cué, *Bundle of Joy*.

expresses both the intense absorption that Cué felt with her daughter and her ambivalence towards being a mother. Constructed with a sewing machine on Arches paper and a diaper cloth, *Bundle of Joy* is comprised of fifteen pages wrapped in diaper cloth and encased inside a four-flap portfolio with ties and cloth spine. The book is meant to represent her daughter Julia. As her starting point, Cué used a box of keepsake items that she had collected from the first year of Julia's life. A graphic designer who had done commercial work prior to moving to Ohio, Cué was interested in the difference between the marketing of babyhood in the U.S. and Mexico. She was particularly struck by the degree that the

mother is required to monitor her child in the United States, something that is wholly absent in Mexico, with its more laissez-faire attitude towards childrearing. *Bundle of Joy* addresses the ambivalence Cué felt as she tried to raise a Mexican child in the Midwest. Several of the pages include instructions that Cué had taken from popular magazines and formula labels: on the page with the Similac label, Cué writes “6 oz Your baby’s health depends on following these simple instructions.” Other pages include feeding charts, diaper changing charts, and notations that indicate Cué’s worry that she is not doing something right. “Did I feed her in too flat a position? Did I bounce her too much? Did I eat chilies and garlic?”

Andrea Liss has suggested that “the feminist mother” 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 medial culture likes to insidiously simplify matters.... It is the feminist mother’s admission that ambiguity is often the norm.”⁷ Almost 30 years after the publication of Jane Lazarre’s *The Mother Knot*, Cué, in spite of very different circumstances from those of Lazarre (a well-established career, a salaried position, excellent daycare), struggled with the same ambivalence towards caring for her baby, losing her identity, and failing to measure up to the image of the perfect mother perpetrated in the media.⁸ “I think the messages marketed to us as mothers create a lot of guilt,” Cué told Susan Wittstock. “I’m hoping this will maybe speak to somebody out there who, even though it was a wonderful experience, felt isolated and exhausted and bored at times. I’m just not sure that women are allowed to feel those things.”⁹ Enthralled with the tiny human be-



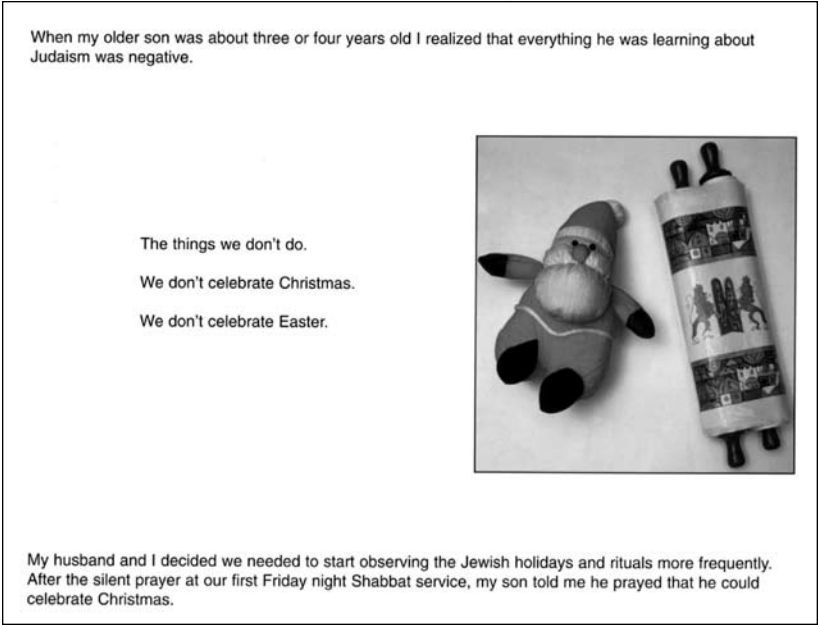
Patricia Cué, *Bundle of Joy*.

ing that she had created, Cué was simultaneously overwhelmed by the bleak winter landscape and her lack of contact with the outside world. One of the last pages of *Bundle of Joy* shows the view from Cué's living room—trees stark and leafless, the ground covered with snow. "Bush might bomb Iraq," the text informs us, followed by "She smiled today. She smiled today. She smiled today." With this page, Cué turns the old adage that the smile of a baby trumps all on its head by lamenting the fact that Julia's first smile has narrowed her world to the point where she does not care if Bush bombs Iraq.

Cué is both a feminist mother *and* a Mexican mother. Feminist literature on mothering and motherhood has been predominantly about middle-class women. When mothers whose identity falls outside of those parameters are written about, it is generally in relationship to cultural, ethnic and class oppression. In anthologies such as *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (Routledge, 1994) or *Mother Troubles* (Beacon Press, 1999), the Latina women are domestic workers, battered women, or illegal Mexican immigrants.¹⁰ Cué, an immigrant by choice whose "Diasporas" have been occasioned by nothing more urgent than employment opportunities, stands in contradistinction to her compatriots. *Bundle of Joy* is an important document not only because it acknowledges, and even embraces, maternal ambivalence, but because it expands upon our knowledge of what it means to be a Mexican immigrant and mother. It is a book written and constructed from a Mexican perspective that belies the stereotype of the oppressed Latina mother that is still so prevalent in contemporary North American culture. Absent are the indigenous colors, Aztec symbols and Marxist rhetoric that we have come to associate with a certain kind of "Mexicanidad" in the visual arts. Nevertheless, it is a book that speaks to a different paradigm of maternity, one in which the trappings of American maternity have become foreign.

GAIL REBHAN, *MOTHER-SON TALK* (1996), *DIVERSITY* (2000),
FAMILY SHIELD (2003)

Unlike Cué and Hong, Gail Rebhan is the grandchild of European Jewish immigrants rather than an immigrant herself. Having been born and raised in America, Rebhan is no stranger to the relentlessly homogenizing consumer culture of this country. Like Cué, Rebhan's work challenges the implicit assumptions of America's consumerist society. Rebhan's challenge is more direct however. Possessed of a biting wit and sly ironic humor, Rebhan uses found objects in her photographs and

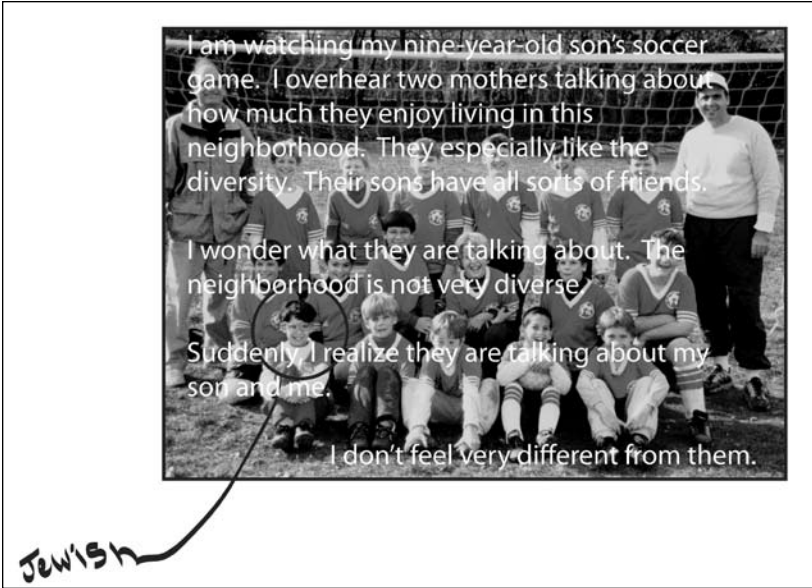


From *Mother-Son Talk*. 1996. Offset artist's book, 7 × 9 inches.

artist's books that narrate her uphill battle to teach her secular children what it means to be Jewish. Rebhan's artist's book *Mother-Son Talk* uses found images along with text to narrate Rebhan's frustrations with imparting Jewish feminist values to two boys enthralled with popular culture. Next to an image of a plastic Santa Claus and toy Torah scroll, Rebhan writes:

When my older son was about three or four years old I realized that everything he was learning about Judaism was negative. The things we don't do: We don't celebrate Christmas. We don't celebrate Easter. My husband and I decided we needed to start observing the Jewish holidays and rituals more frequently. After the silent prayer at our first Friday night Shabbat service, my son told me he prayed that he could celebrate Christmas.¹¹

A few pages later, Rebhan's son tells his mother that he wants to marry someone blonde—or maybe a Jewish girl provided that she is pretty like his mother. By the age of 15, Rebhan's son Jackson has apparently embraced a life of teenage consumption, as evidenced by Rebhan's "portrait" *Jackson—Age 15* (2003), an assemblage of found objects that includes a dirty sock, CDs, candy wrappers, and Coke cans. Rebhan's



Diversity, 1997. Giclee print, 8.5 × 11 inches.

Growing up in the Washington DC area, both of Rebhan's sons experienced the quintessential American childhood, including team sports. In *Diversity*, Rebhan layered the following text over a picture taken of her son's soccer team.

I am watching my nine-year-old son's soccer game. I overhear two mothers talking about how much they enjoy living in this neighborhood. They especially like the diversity. Their sons have all sorts of friends. I wonder what they are talking about. The neighborhood is not very diverse. Suddenly, I realize they are talking about my son and me. I don't feel very different from them.

In fact, Rebhan's son is completely interchangeable with all of the other boys on the team. Rebhan has helpfully written the word Jewish and drawn a line to her son's face, which she circled. Rebhan's experience mothering two sons in the late twentieth century appears on the surface to be fairly typical of the institution of mothering in North America. She is a soccer mom, she works, she cleans up after her very messy children, and she is able to laugh about the whole thing. Nevertheless, as the text in *Diversity* suggests, to be Jewish is to be still considered not quite

white and therefore different. In Rebhan's case, the "diversity" that the other mothers congratulate themselves on attaining is more humorous than anything else. Many years and miles removed from the pogroms and concentration camps of Hitler's Germany, the well-intentioned anti-Semitism of Rebhan's neighbors makes them unwitting buffoons, the butt of the laughter issuing from gallery goers encountering Rebhan's work for the first time.

Rebhan's ironic labeling of her son as "Jewish" causes the viewer to try and find "Jewish" traits in her son's face, traits that would not seem evident in the absence of the label. *Diversity* thus raises the ugly specter of eugenics, the pseudo-science developed by Sir Francis Galton in 1883 based on the idea that it was a moral imperative to improve humanity by encouraging the best and most able to breed. From there, it was a short step to encouraging the less fit not to breed. In Nazi Germany, eugenic science went hand-in-hand with anti-Semitism and the ultimate extermination of millions of people. American eugenics, which flourished during the first three decades of the twentieth century, did not result (fortunately) in the mass extermination of any group of people. It did fuel instances of enforced sterilization and discrimination against those perceived to be less "fit"—initially the poor immigrants that crowded the cities of America. Although the science of eugenics has been largely discredited, its specter still looms large over contemporary notions of motherhood and childrearing, which are as class-based in the early twenty-first century as they were in the early twentieth century. Mothers can now be blamed for both rearing their children incorrectly *and* passing on bad genetic material.¹²

MYREL CHERNICK, *ON THE TABLE* (1996-2007)

"The idealized Good Mother," Sara Ruddick has argued, "is accompanied in fear and fantasy by the Bad Mother.... The Really Bad Mother's evils are specific, avoidable, and worse than her own."¹³ As demonstrated by the philosophical and legal articles included in the anthology *Mother Troubles*, the ideological and social construction of the bad mother is based on race and, more significantly, class. "Bad" mothers are mothers who take drugs during their pregnancy, refuse prenatal care, accept welfare, and allow their children to be abused at the hands of their boyfriends. It almost goes without saying that "bad" mothers often contend with poverty and discrimination. There are many instances of bad mothering in America, but the cases that get attention are when white, middle-class women such as Susan Smith and Andrea Yates kill their children for no



On the Table, 1996. Table, chairs, television sets and videotapes.



On the Table, 1996.

apparent reason. While race and ethnic identity are frequently discussed in relationship to maternal ideology, the issue of class is less often considered. And yet the debate around good and bad mothers is one that is often colored by perception about social class and middle-class behavior.

Murderous mothers are one thing. The territory of bad mother—and blighted child—is more nebulous. Very often, the blighted child—and the bad mother—are seen as a result of socio-economic circumstances. The mother's class background precludes her from understanding how to interact properly with her child and influences her to make terrible mistakes.

In the video installation *On the Table*, Myrel Chernick takes on the myth of the bad working-class mother as constructed by popular culture and in the media. *On the Table* is comprised of an old yellow Formica table and chairs with two very old television sets placed on top. One television set shows women sitting at that table while narrating incidents about their mothers. These incidents range from bizarre—one mother uses a blackhead remover on her daughter's chin but refuses to acknowledge that she has a bad case of acne—to terribly poignant—another mother who was forced to drop out of college takes her daughter to the University of Toronto and tells her that she will love it there. These stories of motherhood serve to unpack the ideological construction of mothers and motherhood as white, middle class, and self-sacrificing. The women seated at this table—itsself a nostalgic evocation of a childhood from the fifties, sixties, and sometimes seventies—are of all different classes, races, ages, and sexual preferences. What they bring to the table is not so much a universal narrative of motherhood as a commonality of having mothers—as well as the implicit knowledge that the definition of motherhood depends on a number of social factors.

The other television set, a black and white portable from the sixties, alternates among images of Chernick and her family having breakfast on Mother's Day at the Formica table, a series of "headless" women carefully setting and clearing the same table, and a straightforward presentation of the story of Alice Crimmins, who was convicted for murdering her children in the mid-seventies. A lovely young woman who was "a former cocktail waitress," Crimmins denied that she had murdered her children right up until her conviction. Paroled five years later, she could be found yachting off the coast of New York with her husband, a former prison guard, in a ship named after her murdered daughter. The inclusion of Alice Crimmins' case, read against the more moderate descriptions of motherly intervention, calls into question the construction of the bad—as opposed to good—mother. Alice Crimmins supposedly dated many men after the breakup of her marriage and was apparently out with one of her boyfriends just before the children were murdered. Newspaper accounts of the Crimmins case emphasized Alice's appearance, clothing, former (and brief) profession as a cocktail waitress,

and numerous boyfriends. Even today, the issue of Crimmins' guilt or innocence remains unresolved. What was at stake, as Chernick's video makes clear, is Crimmins' transgression of the norms of the institution of motherhood. Crimmins' membership in the proletariat class is confirmed by both her choice of profession and the media's focus on her sexuality. The fact that Crimmins' children were murdered is almost beside the point. Crimmins was guilty, regardless of whether she did or did not murder her children.



Camille Billops and James Hatch, *Finding Christa*, 1991.

CAMILLE BILLOPS AND JAMES HATCH, *FINDING CHRISTA* (1991)

What is worse, the mother who murders her children or the mother who gives her child up for adoption? *Finding Christa*, a film made by the artist/filmmaker Camille Billops and her husband, college professor James Hatch, is a disturbing film that plays on the conceit of the black, middle-class family and the ideal black mother. The film tells the story of Billops' reunion with her daughter Christa Victoria, whom she gave up for adoption at age four. The film, shot in 16 mm, opens with a shot

of Christa shortly before she was given up for adoption while a voice-over from the adult Christa asked plaintively why her mother had left her at the children's home. The film then segues to a re-enactment of a conversation between Billops and her friend Coreen Simpson, in which Billops tells Simpson that the adult Christa has contacted her. Billops tells her friend that she isn't sorry that she gave Christa up, noting that she wanted something better for herself and for Christa.

Finding Christa then returns to Los Angeles in the years before Billops, a single mother who was becoming increasingly desperate, decided to give up Christa for adoption. The Los Angeles period is recreated through family films, old photographs, and interviews. Valerie Smith has pointed out that these photographs and movies seemingly recreate the joy of the middle-class family life that Billops enjoyed in the late fifties, a joy that is undercut by the interviews and by Billops herself.¹⁴ Billops, when she meets Christa, as she does slightly later in the film, clearly has a lot of difficulty connecting with Christa, trying to force her at one point towards the end of the movie to look at family photographs while Christa speaks with her adoptive mother on the phone. The testimony of Billops' relatives suggests that they would have taken Christa and raised her themselves. Billops' cousin Bertha goes so far as to suggest that Billops



Film still: *Finding Christa*, 1991.

gave up Christa in order to pursue her career and travel with Hatch to Egypt. Slightly later in the film Billops suggests otherwise, pointing out that her family wasn't willing to care for Christa as they claim they were, and that she had little choice but to give Christa up.

Finding Christa is an extraordinary film, in part because Billops' portrayal of herself as an ambivalent mother is so unflinchingly honest. In fact, Christa probably *was* better off without her mother, the pain of the initial separation notwithstanding. In the second section of the movie, "Where Were You Christa?" it turns out that Christa was adopted by a loving family. This second section focuses on Christa's adoptive mother, Margaret Leibig. Leibig, a singer who encourages Christa's love of music, is in many ways the archetypal African American mother—warm, loving, and self-sacrificing in comparison to Billops' distant mother. *Finding Christa* is a documentary, albeit an unusual example of the genre that was made almost eight years after the initial reunion. Because of its resemblance to films that purport to give the viewer a "true" and unedited narrative, *Finding Christa* has elicited more negativity than any of Billops' other films.¹⁵ And yet, as Janet K. Cutler has argued, *Finding Christa* in fact poses a challenge to the hegemonic Hollywood depiction of African American maternity as eternally self-sacrificing. The film ends somewhat ambiguously—Christa is still torn between her biological mother and her adoptive mother, and Billops does not suddenly become warm and cuddly. As Cutler argues, "*Finding Christa* challenges the idea that women should be more responsible than men for child-rearing—even if it means raising a child alone or largely delegating childcare to extended family members."¹⁶

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to Truong's silent mother, who must have suffered terribly as she watched her daughter struggle to fit into the American South. Truong recalled that "In the fall of 1975, I came along and provided these students with something new, an entirely revised idea of what it meant not to fit in. They rewarded me for introducing them to multiculturalism with a daily barrage of name-calling, with most of the epithets being generic and inaccurate."¹⁷ Much has changed since 1975, when it was still acceptable to make fun of somebody because of their race, religion, or appearance. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go before there is parity in the media representation of the institution of motherhood. Feminists and feminist artists, as Andrea Liss has demonstrated, have been reluctant to embrace motherhood and the

figure of the mother because of their need to “distance themselves from all that was culturally coded as passive, weak and irrational, sometimes repudiating their own mothers.”¹⁸ Until we do so, however, the gains realized by women in the second-wave feminist movement will not be fully realized.

Notes

¹Monique Truong, “The Loneliest Birthday Girl,” *Parents* (May 2007): 98.

²Katrina Irving, *Immigrant Mothers: Narratives of Race and Maternity, 1890-1925* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 15.

³Pranee Liamputtong, “Motherhood and the Challenge of Immigrant Mothers: A Personal Reflection,” *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services* 82.2 (2000): 197.

⁴bell hooks, “marginality as a site of resistance,” *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and Cornel West (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 337.

⁵Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 12.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Andrea Liss, “Maternal Rites: Feminist Strategies,” *n.paradoxa* 14 (2004): 25.

⁸Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot*, intro. Sara Ruddick (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976, 1986). Lazarre’s book was the first to explore the ambivalence that many educated women felt in the face of institutionalized motherhood.

⁹Susan Wittstock, “Tiny Muses,” *Perspectives* (Spring/Summer 2005): 28.

¹⁰Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey, eds., *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994); Julia E. Hanigsberg and Sara Ruddick, eds. *Mother Troubles: Rethinking Contemporary Maternal Dilemmas* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

¹¹Gail Rebhan, *Mother-Son Talk: A dialogue between a mother and her young sons* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop, 1996), 26.

¹²Most of my information on the Eugenics movement was taken from the web site *Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement* <<http://www.eugenics-archive.org/eugenics>> viewed 11/12/09.

¹³Sara Ruddick, “Talking about Mothers,” originally published in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989), reprinted in Moyra Davey, ed., *Mother Reader* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 190.

¹⁴Valerie Smith, “Photography, Narrative, and Ideology in *Suzanne Suzanne* and

Finding Christa by Camille Billops and James V. Hatch,” in Marianne Hirsch, ed., *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 94.

¹⁵Janet K. Cutler, “Don’t Say Mammy,” in Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly, and Elaine Roth, eds., *Motherhood Misconceived* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 222.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Truong, “The Loneliest Birthday Girl,” 98.

¹⁸Liss, “Maternal Rites,” 25.

MARGARET MORGAN

Home Truths

[W]ith the question of the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth, we have the roots of what we would call the “critical” tradition in the West.¹

DEMOCRACY HAS ALWAYS NEEDED CRITICS. In his seminar “Discourse and Truth” Foucault examined the concept of the *parrhesiastes*, from the ancient Greek—the one who speaks truth to power. To summarize, these critics shall be honorable and dutiful. They shall speak frankly and fully. They shall speak that which they sincerely believe to be true. The proof of their sincerity should lie in the fact that they speak to the powerful without consideration of the consequences for themselves should they incur the wrath of those to whom they speak or should they incriminate themselves. Artists have often served the role of the *parrhesiastes*, and in this essay I discuss two contemporary artists who perform that critical function. Before examining the work of Catherine Opie and Andrea Bowers, it is important to consider the social and political contexts from which their projects have sprung.

The administration of George W. Bush did not honor the *parrhesiastes*. Instead they punished critics. Rather than take difficult questions from the press corps, they handpicked reporters and scripted press conferences. Rather than listening to dissenting opinions from within the White House, they chose to keep counsel only with those whose opinions matched their own. Rather than looking for evidence to establish fact, they chose “facts” that confirmed pre-existing conclusions. Potential enemy nations were attacked; possible enemy operatives were imprisoned without trial. Wiretapping and torture were condoned. Each of these contributed to a collective repression of free speech.

Simultaneously, family values were invoked to appease the religious

right of the Republican Party and/or to distract from more pressing issues like war, federal debt and governmental deception. Thus, women's reproductive rights came under threat, federal funding was prohibited for international health-care providers who even so much as mentioned abortion, and moms on welfare were required to work one third more hours before receiving assistance. Meanwhile George W. Bush embodied an easy populism exemplified by his impish grin and rolled-up sleeves, his simple homespun attitudes, and his boyish pleasure in recreational sports. In Kenneth Frampton's presageful words of more than twenty years earlier, "[T]he primary goal of Populism is to function as a *communicative or instrumental sign*."² Thus the image of George Bush functioned as a sign of the 'average Joe' in lieu of policies and programs to support ordinary people. In short, the political climate in which artists Opie and Bowers found themselves suppressed dissent, invoked family values while decimating families, and paraded a populist president while undermining the populous.

During this period, the art market was booming. Auction houses were experiencing price scales never before known, art museums were building global franchises around fleets of buildings by internationally renowned architects, many more artists' incomes were skyrocketing, international biennials became the playgrounds of the rich and their cohorts. Although critical artistic practice always coexists with the commercial art market, during such periods it is overshadowed by the extraordinary flows of capital through the art world. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the look and feel of money dominated.

It is in the confluence of these phenomena—the suppression of dissent, a rigid construction of family, the booming of the art market—that I wish to examine two bodies of work from the period, one by Catherine Opie and the other by Andrea Bowers. Each artist can be aligned with the kind of critical tradition described by Foucault at the beginning of this essay. Each body of work critically engages contemporary understandings of family and motherhood—"motherhood," that most easily instrumentalized of signs. As a subject for artistic expression, the last time motherhood was highly valued was during the Renaissance and that of course in an idealized form. Making *critical* art about mothering under the specific political and economic forces outlined above is none other than the work of the *parrhesiastes*.

"So you see, the *parrhesiastes* is someone who takes a risk."³

By risk, I mean nothing so extreme as incarceration or death. But certainly, the political climate at large and the economic forces specific to the art world were not conducive to speaking truthfully about mothering.

Such a topic was neither fashionable nor remunerative at the time these artists made their work. Even five years later, much of the work of which I will speak has not been acquired, though arguably it is all of major significance. Yet Opie and Bowers both chose to take that risk because truth-telling compelled them to do so.

Though different in form and content, Bowers and Opie both foreground the politics of motherhood, Opie by documenting the present, Bowers by retrieving the past. Opie photographs the life of her own family, her neighborhood, and home. Bowers documents families of another era by drawing meticulous reproductions of newspaper clippings and letters from people seeking abortion some half a decade before its legalization in 1973 under the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case, *Roe v. Wade*. Catherine Opie and Andrea Bowers depict private life as both an elegy for the promise of an earlier era and a fight back: in their work, we see motherhood in all its possibilities and this motherhood is powerful, its image not your average *Madonna and Child*.

CATHERINE OPIE: NOT YOUR AVERAGE MADONNA

A red acanthus-leafed drape enfolds the background. Before the drape sits a mother, her oblique gaze rapt with care upon the child cradled in her arms, who, in returning her gaze, brings full circle the powerful unity that is the maternal dyad. The child is a silver-haired boy, a Baroque angel, a curl of body, fetal in position though obviously a budding two-year-old, molded into the pliant corporeality of his mother, the pellucid flesh of the suckling child a study in the modulation of color and light akin to Boucher. The image, however, is not a painting, but a photograph, a self-portrait of Catherine Opie, *Self Portrait / Nursing* (2004). Her flesh is forty-ish, middle aging, scarred and tattooed in sado-masochistic ritual, delicately filigreed with pale pink ridges, lines, swirls, traces of words, curlicues of scarification. We see sagging breasts, puckered aureole; freckles; a sun-stained diamond of neck-flesh merging into what was once of the same chromatic hue and luminosity as that of the boy who is obviously her son: all this bears an unequivocally local tenor. As much as the image invokes a sixteenth-century Madonna or an eighteenth-century portrait painting and as much as each element—the folds of fabric and skin, the concentrated gaze, the baby toes tucked into a motherly upper arm, the coloration of the whole—brings with it rich and what might be understood as universal associations—the stuff of art history and religious iconography—the image is naught if not confounding of these conventions. With each registration, comes its deconstruction: universality/specificity; purity/

partiality; fecundity/ middle age; gentle mother/butch dyke. Centuries and moments of association swirl and jump and connect and disconnect and reconnect again in rapid circulations: it is the image that blinks before you, the viewer, in a surfeit of stops and starts, simultaneously making sense and nonsense of your witness. It is a nuanced and masterful piece of motherhood indeed. And in this it reminds me of Kenneth Frampton's Critical Regionalism, of local culture and universal civilization: in its courage and liberty, its shamelessness of spirit and its economy of means, the image is the late-born child of an aging modernity. In its specificity, it is something else again: if Frampton was interested in ways in which local architecture could resist a modernization that was reducible to a communicative or instrumental sign, Opie's maternal self-portrait offers a universal sign—motherhood—inflected by a set of powerfully resistant counter-signs, a kind of “regional specificity,” if you like, that makes the image extraordinarily affirming of the maternal bond, fulsome in all its complexity, yet extremely resistant to easy instrumentalization.

Catherine Opie has been documenting domestic life—queer, complex, multifaceted, across race, class and country—for about two decades. The oeuvre has always run counter to prevailing hegemonies about gender, sexuality and community. On occasion, as part of this oeuvre, Opie has taken self-portraits, of which *Self Portrait / Nursing* is an example. During the administration of G. W. Bush, Opie's practice became explicitly critical of the prevailing political culture and her self-portraiture became extended into an entire series, documenting the life of the self in terms social, political, intellectual, psychological. In *In and Around Home* (2004-5), as the body of work is known, Opie has extended the single self-portrait into an at-times vitriolic but always insightful critique of the dominant political culture. At first glance the aesthetic seems to take a back seat to the driving force of documentation: the laudable desire to scream, to chant, to make visible a politic and to make sense of the real effects of politics in people's lives. Yet this would be too narrow a reading of the work: indeed in this series Opie deploys a very knowing use of the anti-aesthetics of Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Helen Levitt and other mid-twentieth-century American photographers, thereby invoking, *ipso facto*, an American sensibility while insisting on the historical specificities of the time and place *she* occupies, the local tenor of this most American of bodies of work. There is an apparent passivity verging on the abject in which, for example, dark interiors set against bright windows are not magically lit from within with fill-flash. Instead of marveling at the photographer's technical bravura (as we do in her *Self Portrait / Nursing*), the viewer is left to ponder their lack of knowledge, what has been



Catherine Opie, *Self Portrait / Nursing*, 2004. C-print, 40 × 32 inches.
Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Edition of 8.



Catherine Opie, *Christmas West Adams*, 2004. C-print, 16 × 20 inches.
Edition of 5.

absented from their view, what can hardly be seen. One such image, *Christmas West Adams* (2004), is fully two-thirds in darkness, but this under-exposure becomes a literalization of profound political omissions: just outside the window, in full daylight, a rainbow flag hangs from the front eave of the house, upon which are the words, “SAY NO to the Bush Agenda”—but the letters as the viewer of the photograph sees them are in reverse. For the flag is seen from behind, as if we are standing in the space that would be the house’s darkened interior, facing the street from the point of view of the flag’s advocate (and referent), from the position of the one who says the ‘no’ the flag declares to the world beyond the lush vegetation of the front garden. We see through multiple registers of social space: home, replete with a Christmas tree invisible in the darkness but for its colored lights in the foreground (and the cue for the photograph’s title); in the middle ground, a liminal space upon which to project an idea, with which to connect to community—the space of the rainbow flag and beyond that, the verdant plantings, like a kid’s picture book slice-of-paradise; then, the space of the street, low fences, cars parked, houses in rows. We register these spaces, on a continuum from private to public and back again, from the point of view of an anti-Bush rainbow coalition. The viewer does not simply observe this homely protest: the viewer occupies its subject position. So it is the viewer who is given only partial access to, a tantalizing suggestion of, the family festivities, the family life, in the foreground but who is required to see literally from the point of view of that family. In this the viewer’s position is radicalized: neither comfortable voyeur, the old scopic privilege conventionally reserved for masculinity, nor privileged intimate: the viewer has been invited in but not fully so—for this home, though seen up close and personal, is, literally and symbolically, barely visible.

Taken within a short radius of the artist’s domicile, the series *In and Around Home* documents a multitude of subject positions and registers of being, knowing and ways of having agency, all of which articulate malleable yet durable connections: from local protests to parades to graduation celebrations to murals to memorial shrines to protest banners (and their tagging by graffitists) to handmade signs painted on the exterior of a local store to film crews and television journalists as they construct the evening news, to the still interior of a single, local polling booth. *In and Around Home* is a vivid portrait, in microcosm, of democracy at work: contested, constructed, registered as joyous, angry, disputed, celebratory, by people standing together, partying together, marching together, being together and being alone, and the traces of their writing, drawing, speaking, engaging, lively and in all fractious contestation connected to a

belief in the right to voice opinion, the right to exist. As different as the specifics of the depicted subject positions might be, Opie's photographs speak to this commonality, to this shared, messy, noisy coexistence.

Consider, for example, the triptych, *In Protest to Sex Offenders 2005; Homecoming USC 2004; M.L.K. Parade 2005* (2004-05). As the title describes, there are three scenes. Each event takes place on the street. Each relies on a critical mass of people for its existence. The first is a group of mostly black figures, adults and children, protesting the concentration of a significant number of sex offenders in a local halfway house, an angry man sporting a bullhorn anchoring the left of the composition, the oblique late-afternoon light unifying the whole. Next is a scene of a USC homecoming party of mostly white, mostly male figures, three beards and a pro-Bush T-shirt prominent in the middle ground, a blanket's stripe on the lower right echoing the diagonal shaft of sunset on the lower right of the first image. In each of these two scenes are figures standing with folded arms, and signage on either placards or T-shirts that seem to serve as much as barriers as markers. The third is a scene of mostly standing figures, mostly black and female, at a Martin Luther King Day celebration. The figures' looks are askew, their glances sideways across the picture plane, attention diverted to action taking place outside our view. As such, the images recall nineteenth-century paintings like Renoir's *Le Moulin de la Galette* (1876), in which casually posed figures occupy the pictorial space and reach beyond it, their truncated forms suggesting the extension of activity beyond the frame, this a fragment of a much larger whole, a "painting" of modern life in West Adams, Los Angeles. And in the center of each of these compositions is a woman, face turned to the side, looking askance—a pregnant woman in a pink singlet, a woman in red sitting quietly amused, a woman in pink hiding her face—the still centers of dynamic scenes. "Mothering" is not foregrounded in this piece but neither is it sentimentalized nor sequestered away. Women and children are always there. Mothering is implicitly part of the political life of the culture, literally linked through color and form. In two of the scenes, the color red dominates, in the clothes worn and in signage, and in a beer can in the foreground. Pink links one of these two with the third of the trio as do the crowds themselves, taking the middle-ground of all three images and together forming a continuous undulating line, a wave of humanity, albeit one that never floats unanchored and drifting into vague and sentimental humanism but rather is always insistently attached—to cultures and events as different socio-politically as they are similar in form and place. While the documentary function of the work is overt and the images so content-laden as to make the formal aspects

seem merely incidental, these arrangements of shapes and lines and colors are anything but passive. In Opie's work meaning is situated in and through the logic of form and in this it imbricates form and content, those once-upon-a-time separate spheres of modernism.

FORM AND MALCONTENT

The series *In and Around Home* embeds its politics in the very stuff of its formal language. Its overt political content is registered not only by the images themselves but in the difference between photographic media employed: the documentary images, some of which I have described above, take the form of C-prints. These are accompanied by Polaroid photographs of TV news broadcasts and talking heads. The C-prints function indexically while the Polaroids document the manufacture of politics as media spectacle. Sometimes in groupings of as many as nine, they are redolent with images of the war in Iraq, domestic political storms in teacups, the gesticulations of politicians and pundits at home and abroad. Together the two types of photograph make vivid the contradictions between grass-roots reality and the gloss of political rhetoric. Thus the viewer connects a rather blank image of a polling booth in Los Angeles, empty, poorly lit, full of unmarked ballots, with what one can think of as its complement, the TV image of the purple-stained fingers of an enfranchised population in Iraq. In another photograph we see a news anchor filmed in the neighborhood with the attendant cameras and crews as she constructs the evening news. Its complement?—the Polaroids of sensational and vacuous newscasts. In yet another coupling we look to a newspaper lying folded on a front porch step. When we read its headline, that Bush's doctrine is to "spread liberty," we glean through the television images of the presidential visage with its artificial smile that this "liberty" is like margarine: easy to spread but of dubious content.

If "*art no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs but to a lack of connections*"⁴—and here I quote Jacques Rancière—Catherine Opie's work at once documents and, in the documenting, enhances the very connections that are lamented lost: the social bonds at work in the contestation of democracy, the right to freedom of expression, the right to assembly and, in the most profound ontology, the right to be. In this, Opie's work positions the public sphere and the private, the political and the domestic, on a continuum: individual agency is a family matter and family is a feminist issue and being queer is being normal: and mothering is at the center of it all.

ANDREA BOWERS: CIRCA 1968

Being and subjectivity are ostensibly at the root of the debates around abortion rights and family values still contested in the United States. Where does subjectivity begin? Where does it end? Who speaks or acts for whom? Since the advent of the oral contraceptive pill, American women have experienced the promise and entitlement of having children, or not, at the time of their choice. Generations of feminists and progressive leaders have fought to privilege the subjectivity of the woman over the theoretical subjectivity of the fetus and, since 1973, women have had the right to abort a pregnancy unwanted for whatever reason: *abortion without apology*. Yet the anti-abortion movement has made up a lot of ground since then and women of child-bearing age seem more complacent about the eroding of rights that might have a direct impact on their lives. Enter Andrea Bowers and her exhibition entitled *Nothing is Neutral*. Shown at REDCAT, Los Angeles, in 2006, it is a tribute to pro-choice feminist activism and the individual women who have pioneered it. Working from papers found in the archives of the Society for Humane Abortion and the Association to Appeal Abortion Laws, Bowers' tribute takes the form of an installation of drawings, wallpaper, video, and books. A series of meticulous, lovingly detailed pencil drawings reproduce letters dated circa 1968 that were addressed to the Association to Repeal Abortion Laws. The original letters were written for women and girls seeking abortions when abortion was still illegal. Some were written by the women themselves, others by their families, husbands, fathers and boyfriends. Bowers' suite of drawings, collectively entitled *Wall of Letters: Necessary Reminders from the Past for a Future of Choice* (2005), has the feel of a shrine of remembrance, the solemnity of a war memorial. Each drawing is spare in form but extremely studied in articulation as it precisely iterates the written word down to the very physical being of each letter: the weight of the typed character on the page, the press of a pen, the scratchy eccentricity of the handwritten word. The drawings are exacting, photorealist one could say, and as such they are indeed "reminders of the past," both historically and aesthetically speaking.

The formal concerns of a branch of Pop painting (photorealism) and the specific histories of women leading up to the legalization of abortion are not usually invoked simultaneously, yet they occurred within the same historical period. In Bowers' *Nothing is Neutral*, nothing, not even a painting technique, is outside the social and historical forces of its time. Though the period is circa 1968, Bowers focuses not upon the grand revolutions and student riots of the era but the rather less spectacular revolution of



Andrea Bowers, *Nothing is Neutral*, 2006. Installation view, Gallery at REDCAT, Los Angeles. Photo: Scott Groller.

2-12-68

I don't exactly know how to write this letter--just knowing your address and no name but here goes--all I want to say is can you help me?

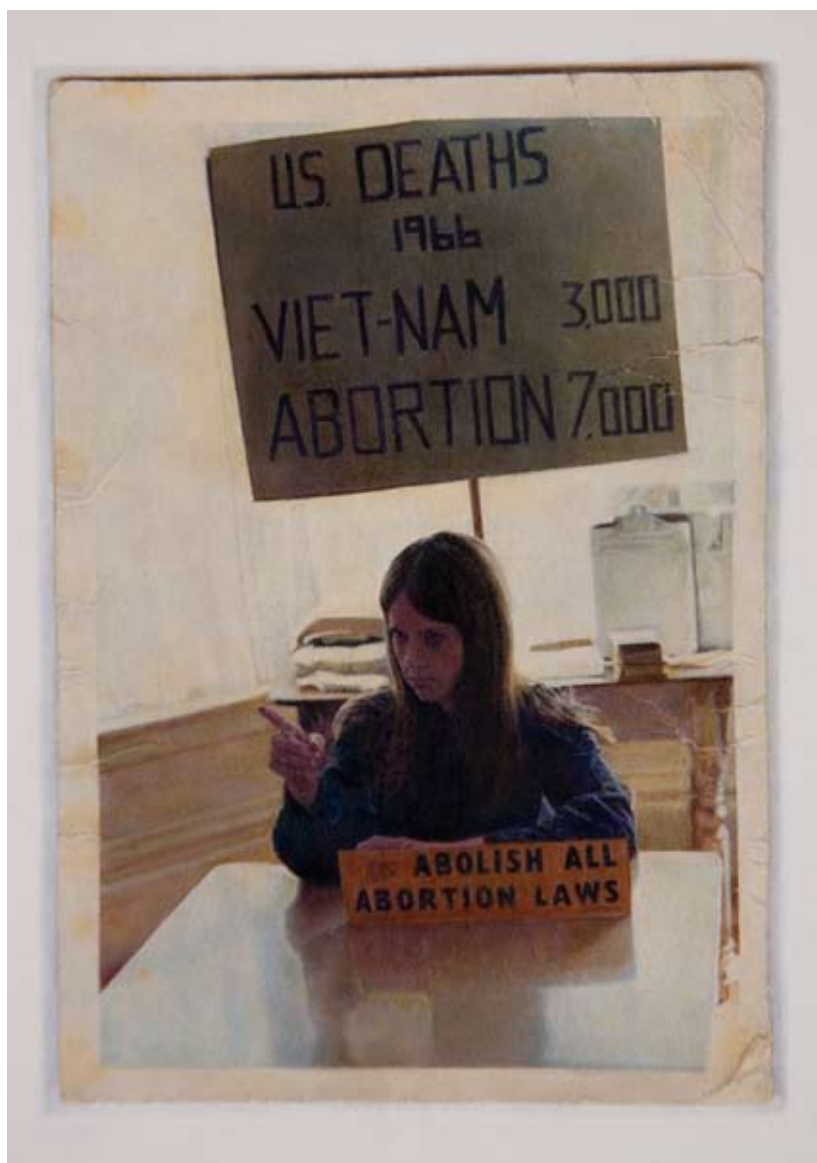
A friend told me about seeing your ad in the Los Angeles Free Press which I guess was put about two months ago dealing with abortions. I called them and was informed to write to this P. O. Box number, so you can see, I don't live in the San Francisco area. Is there someone in this area? Please let me know that and if not, how can I get it sent in San Francisco. Could you please let me know by Friday or Saturday. I'm sorry, but I just can't stand the waiting anymore, but I guess that isn't anything out of the ordinary to you.

Thank you for just reading this--please want to help me.

~~_____~~
DATE AND TELEPHONE NUMBER

If you could help me, could I come on a weekend--please include this info--I just can't do me like this!

Andrea Bowers, *Wall of Letters: Necessary Reminders from the Past for a Future of Choice*, #4, 2006. Pencil on paper, 15 × 22.25 inches paper size. Courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photo: Gene Ogami.



Andrea Bowers, *Young Abortion Rights Activist, San Francisco Bay Area, 1966*, (Photo lent from the Archives of Patricia Maginnis), 2005. Colored pencil on paper
15 × 38.25 inches paper size, 52.5 × 40.75 inches frame size.
Courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photo: Joshua White.



Andrea Bowers, *Design of Choice (My Body My Choice with Stripes)* (detail), 2005.
Colored pencil on paper, 13.875 × 10.375 inches.

family values and domestic choice, sheet by mimeographed sheet, small town by small town. Analogously, Bowers' photorealism is very different from photorealist paintings of the 1960s. In a painting by Richard Estes, for example, one encounters a kind of Pop optimism, a celebration of the vernacular world of spectacular capital. Shop fronts and objects for sale are frozen and splintered in a dazzling array of reflections and mirrors and reflections of mirrors, all surface and shine and disorientation, so that the viewer may never be certain of their witness, except for the fact that the viewer witnesses an impressive bravura, a *tour de force* of technical achievement on the part of the artist. In historical photorealism, the flash of the artist's skill subsumes the overt content of the painting, and that content's connection to life. Content is secondary, a vehicle to display painterly technique. Bowers' use of hyperrealism has none of the showy bluster of such historical forebears.⁵ Certainly we are impressed with her technical bravura, her ability to emulate a photograph, yet, as with Catherine Opie, it is impossible to separate that formal technique, however brilliant, from its subject. The artist's hand is subsumed by the content of the material depicted in what must be a meditative process indeed, a tender and modest testimony to these extraordinary responses to desperate times.

Wall of Letters #4, as a drawing, is a remarkable facsimile of a typed letter, the words of which float on a white surface in a simple milk-white frame. The letter, though dated 2-12-68, without addressee and with the sender's name obliterated, still has a tone of urgency. At the level of overt content, the author implores the addressee several times in the missive, "Please want to help me," the word "please" recurring four times in the brief. At a subliminal level, the very typography reiterates this distress. In the original, many of the individual characters' "holes," or "counters" to use the typographical term, are filled in with ink as if the typewriter's ribbon overflowed its bounds, like blood or desire, like a body's holes overwhelmed and overflowing, or clogged and drowning as much as the person whose fingers punched the keys. Across the form of the characters, word to word with each keystroke, we note a subtle undulation of color, the fading in and out of ink, a darker impress here, a lighter one there, like breathing, in and out, in and out. We notice the physicality of the original *because* it is reproduced by Bowers' hand, the copy allowing the viewer more fully to know the source.

Many of the letters have a sense of sometimes barely contained ignominy as the authors anxiously seek to establish the reasonableness of their requests, which of course brings to mind how much their reason was already under suspicion and how much things have indeed changed

for women since then. “Due to circumstances,” “my doctor has informed me,” “fully aware of my responsibilities,” the authors write, arguing, deferring, apologizing, begging for what is as one woman put it, “a 5 minute operation.” The verisimilitude of Bowers’ handmade drawings of these pleas for drastic measures, the close observation of each detail of the physicality of the text, returns the originals’ attempt at objectivity to the intimate realm, even while the content of the written words takes us from the personal right back to the political, from the past right back to the present. As the viewer peers into the page to examine Bowers’ technique, the viewer becomes all the more aware of these things. Thus, rather than the content serving the technique, it is Bowers’ drawing that *brings home* the overt content to us, her technique in service to that end.

As with Catherine Opie’s work, technical bravura is as much at the service of the content as it is a quality in and of itself, marking out the formal and the political on a continuum with each other. The first paragraph of letter #4 contains a plea, “Can you help me?” The drawing of the letter functions in reply by positioning the original in a place *to help us*. For in copying the original, stroke by tiny stroke, and making an image of this cry for help, the letter helps us remember lest we forget all there is to lose. There is a humility in the respectfulness with which Bowers copies these forty-year-old missives, as if in penance for ignorance, as if by copying each indentation of ink on paper, she might herself begin to comprehend and reveal for her audience the enormous difficulties women experienced negotiating their reproductive lives pre *Roe v. Wade*. And in a political culture in which that decision has been increasingly contested (and legally tested), the revelation comes none too soon.

There is another aspect to the use of hyperrealism at work in Bowers’ project. What is documented in her realism is as much about the reproduction of the original as the original itself. Thus the drawings reproduce the quality of a typewriter or a photocopy or a mimeograph or a battered old photograph, its edges all turned, a last physical relic of events past. If a photograph is an event’s index, then Bowers’ drawing of a photograph speaks to how very fragile an index it may be. Consider *Young Abortion Rights Activist, San Francisco Bay Area, 1966 (Photo Lent from the Archives of Patricia Maginnis)* (2005). The image, drawn in colored pencil, sits in the middle of a pristine sheet of paper. It is a drawing of a small color photograph, tones faded, yellows dropping out, surface mottled, edges rubbed and frayed. The photograph casts a slight *trompe l’oeil* shadow on the page. It is an old photograph that, we are told in the title of the drawing, is from an archive. What was photographed all those decades ago was a young woman holding a sign and gesticulating.

Her finger is pointing. Her sign reads, “Abolish all abortion laws.” We know the era because behind her is a larger banner that declares: “U.S. Deaths 1966, Vietnam 3000, Abortion 7,000.” As with Catherine Opie’s documents of protest banners, there is built-in a complex registration of history and the recording of history and the history of recordings of history. Bowers’ viewer learns some old facts, or remembers them, but then she may also learn how very fleeting those memories may be and how easily overturned those monumental historical changes.

In Bowers’ installation, *Nothing is Neutral*, *Wall of Letters* was juxtaposed with *Letter to the Army of Three Displayed*, which consisted of two entire walls papered floor to ceiling with decorative gift-wrapping papers and still more letters photocopied from the archive. Totaling some 316 sheets, each 24 inches high by 18 inches wide, the effect was to multiply the sense of urgency of the discreet and solemn individual drawings of the *Wall of Letters*. Like a giant quilt, or the ghost of feminist wallpapers past,⁶ *Displayed* overwhelms the viewer with its repetitions and its patterning, its variety and its color, and brings home the enormity and banality of these tragic narratives. Some of the wrapping papers are also reproduced as drawings, a series entitled *Design of Choice*. These drawings on first sight seem like a trivial surfeit, a purely decorative display—until one notices that the images contain renderings of activist pins discreetly placed over areas of matching color. Again, the decorative and the political, the formal and the social, form and content in modernist parlance, are on a continuum, never one without the other.

A video entitled *Letters to an Army of Three* (2005), consisting of readings of the texts of the letters that Bowers has so tenderly rendered in *Wall of Drawings*, played on a monitor suspended from the gallery’s ceiling. In the video, each letter is read aloud, the reader sitting awkwardly upon a stool before a closed curtain. It is as if the readers are compelled to complete their task but cannot help reacting to the content of the letters. They squirm. We hear the quiver of their enunciation, the timbre of their voice making palpable their reactions. They pause, sometimes for many seconds. The gender, age, ethnicity and perhaps class of the sitters vary widely. They are not necessarily actors. The figures sit in front of changing decorative curtains and beside each is a changing arrangement of flowers. We never see the ground beneath their feet and the scene is always swathed in a dim half-light. Each reading is very individual and yet it is all the same, all of a piece. It is simultaneously local and universal. There is neither beginning nor end to the video, no narrative arc, only the cumulative fragments of these real stories reenacted. The video is paced by each changing text, reader, curtain and vase of flow-

ers, each fading in, fading out, again rather like a slow but insistent breathing. The floral arrangements are highly formal and deployed to punctuate the readings, their placement shifting as the shot fades from reader with flowers to flowers alone to reader with flowers. As with the *Wall of Letters*, the piece has an elegiac quality, a memorial function and the flowers become almost funereal. Whose funeral, one might wonder? What happened to those whose voices are being resuscitated? What of liberty? Choice? What of the centuries of association between women, domesticity and the artful display of flowers? Each bowl of flowers, beautifully arranged, makes of the scene a tableau, a still life, meaning to be gleaned from the shadows of the tableau like a painting from the Northern Renaissance. For as with a traditional still life, the tableau may be deciphered: *still life*: we are still here, still alive and the “pro-life” position is really *nature morte*.

As someone who came of age in the 1980s, half a generation after *Roe v. Wade*, Bowers is a self-confessed apolitical non-activist, who has only relatively recently come to believe in “the power of the people,” in the ability of ordinary folks’ social activism to change public policy. Perhaps because her realization is only recent, her conviction is full of wonderment and awe at the courage of activists whose historic work she brings to light: those such as the Army of Three and A.R.A.L. (Association to Repeal Abortion Laws and predecessor to the still-extant N.A.R.A.L.). We learn from reading the *Wall of Letters* about the Army of Three, whose steadfast criticality and clear-sighted understanding of the dangers of illegal abortion and practical advice for women needing abortions were so important to changing laws and attitudes about women’s reproductive rights in the United States. We learn from the installation and from the catalogue that the Army of Three was Patricia Maginnis, Rowena Gurner and Lana Phelan. In the decade preceding the legalization of abortion, these three women worked tirelessly to disseminate information about safe abortions, the old-fashioned way, long before the internet, by traveling around the United States, distributing leaflets and speaking to women in union halls, meeting rooms and private homes. Their mimeographed information included the names of abortion providers as far afield as Mexico and Japan and detailed descriptions of how to terminate a pregnancy oneself.

INDIRECT ACTION

As representations in an art gallery and not in themselves direct action, Bowers builds into the work the political limits of her practice when

compared to the activism she documents, the very busy work of distributing information about safe abortion while women were still dying by the thousands in botched backyard jobs. As if to reiterate that it is the Army of Three, to whom the letters were addressed, that is the radical heart of her project, Bowers signals the relative modesty of her contribution through a number of cues: she makes the ephemera of activism the subject of her artwork; in video, she *stages* readings of the letters; in drawings, she reproduces the letters as images and depicts activist buttons pinned to patterned papers; all the while the artist points to the work's status as surfeit, as reconstruction, as decoration, a subtle acknowledgment that the work reifies activism rather than embodies it. Yet Bowers' project is an honorable one, for what remains engaging about it is its memorial status, as if to remind us that the gallery persists as a place for the possibility of social exchange: the sharing of information and the potential activation of political consciousness—something the religious right has known at least since Jesse Helms.⁷ For Bowers' work allows for rational communication: people stand around *reading* the drawings of the letters. The work's commemorative aspect, the authenticity of its source material, the sincerity of its author—these are qualities that speak to the urgency of the current situation while acknowledging the artist's historical remove from the source material—I *have placed vintage activist pins onto a decorative ground. They function as valuable sentiment and they are also part of a legacy. Mea culpa, I acknowledge I have no direct experience of these historical events, only second- and third-hand access. Yet I must still tell all of you who may have forgotten or who may never have known.* We understand Bowers' reconstruction of a specific historical moment as a self-conscious act that does not claim to be the activism it documents. Nor does it sensationalize its subject matter or seek to produce in the viewer an abject reaction to explicit depictions of, for example, the results of backyard abortions. To do so would be to put Bowers' practice on the side of the anti-abortion movement with its vivid depictions of purported fetal distress and so on. Instead Bowers seeks the viewer's active engagement with studied and utterly respectful depictions of the relics of activism's past and she donates 10 percent of her sales to Planned Parenthood and other pro-choice organizations for the sake of the future. Like the newly converted, she is zealous and her zeal is contagious: in a culture disillusioned with truth, Bowers' meticulous renderings ring true. Like Frampton's critical regionalism, it is the very specificity, the precision of the renderings of precise historical fact that draws us in and which makes us believe in the veracity of

the narrative. If we are skeptical of what is presented to us as fact, our eyes widen as we peer into the “reproduction of fact” and the fact of reproduction: the artist’s *and our own*.

THE PERSONAL IS (STILL) POLITICAL

The work of Catherine Opie and Andrea Bowers functions as *consciousness raising* or perhaps as loci for consciousness raising, which is to say that they prompt discussion, opinion and perhaps redress, their audiences metaphorically sharing experiences as if in a circle and understanding the political patterns that underpin individual experience. To see the work is to want to talk about it and through it. In this neither they nor their audience is mute or passive. Rather they wear their politics and their persuasions on their sleeves. *Without apology*. In this they take up the Jesse Helmses of the world, ironically the very conservatives who most understand the power and potential of art, the power as Foucault put it of “the ‘critical’ tradition in the West.” This is their truth and truth their value.

Opie and Bowers speak to the truths of mothering and not-mothering on a continuum, they document the present via the past, they situate family values in the center of political and aesthetic discourse, they refuse to place content and form in a hierarchy of value, nor indeed mothering and not-mothering, each instead addressing the other. Opie and Bowers situate the politics of the maternal at the very center of political life, motherhood functioning in all its specificity as a counter to the rhetorical spin of the simplifications of its contemporary milieu. The personal is still political but if feminism from the seventies was largely from the point of view of the daughter, and here Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1972–78) is exceptional, it is high time for the voice of the mother—no, for lots of voices of lots and lots of mothers, loud and strong, and talking back and taking over the discourse: Bowers and Opie offer such powerful voices, the urgently needed *parrhesiastes*.

—Margaret Morgan 2007

Coda: I am happy to say that after the 43rd administration came the 44th and with it the promise of a White House that eagerly looks to the *parrhesiastes*. The incoming Obama administration itself promises a return to truth-telling and a restoration of democratic principles decimated under Bush 43. It also promises an arts policy that supports art and art education as crucial parts of our democratic life. However, the right to privacy and human dignity are yet to be restored and the centrality of

mothering to our political well-being yet to be recognized, so I am glad to be reminded by the examples of Opie and Bowers of the one role of the artist that is most important now: the role of truth-teller.

—Margaret Morgan, January 2009

Notes

¹Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/ Foreign Agents, 2001), 5.

²Kenneth Frampton, “Prospects for a Critical Regionalism” in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*, ed. Kate Nesbit (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 471.

³Foucault, *Fearless*, 16.

⁴Jacques Rancière, “Problems and Transformations in Critical Art (2004),” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 90.

⁵Certainly Bowers’ project has a link to her feminist photorealist predecessors such as Audrey Flack, whose work also placed equal value on content and technique.

⁶I refer to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” 1892.

⁷In 1989 Jesse Helms, former five-term Republican Senator from North Carolina, 1973-2003, widely known for his racist and homophobic attitudes, spearheaded major cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts, bans on funding art deemed offensive or depicting sexual or excretory activities, and the end of grants to individual artists entirely—policies from which the NEA, as of 2008, has never recovered.

Observations of a Mother

PHOTOGRAPHY, ACCORDING TO ROLAND BARTHES, can be considered from three possible points of view. First, of course, is the photographer's point of view. At the beginning of *Camera Lucida*, his book on photography, Barthes tells us that he "could not join the troupe of those (the majority) who deal with Photography-according-to-the-Photographer" because he does not take pictures.¹ While for many this would not in fact pose a major obstacle to adopting such a perspective, Barthes is committed to grounding his study in his own subjective experience. Thus he restricts himself to the two remaining standpoints: that of the person photographed and that of the person who looks at photos.

Barthes's next chapter, entitled "He Who Is Photographed," talks about how he feels when being photographed and when looking at pictures of himself. The following chapter, "The *Spectator*," turns to the third perspective. And the rest of the book, forty-two more chapters, never departs from that third perspective.

With this preponderance of "the SPECTATOR," the single chapter devoted to the photographed subject becomes no more than a fleeting memory. I want here to pick up the position *Camera Lucida* briefly assumes and then drops. If, according to Barthes, photography is most often treated from the photographer's point of view, almost all the rest of the writing on photography is surely from the perspective of what he calls the "spectator," whether the latter be art historian, critic, or amateur. Formal discourse on photography is rarely from the standpoint of the photographed subject. Although all three points of view are, for Barthes, subjective, there may be something about the second point of view that is most troublingly personal, anecdotal, self-concerned. It may be the position from which it is most difficult to claim valid general insights. Perhaps that is why Barthes—who is, to be sure, darlingsly subjective in this book—drops it like a hot potato.

Later, in the second half of the book, long after he is comfortably enconced in his role as spectator, Barthes definitively if subjectively locates the essence of photography in one specific picture: “Something like an essence of the Photograph floated in this particular picture. I therefore decided to ‘derive’ all Photography from the only photograph which assuredly existed for me” (73). That singular photo is a picture of Barthes’s mother. Given the exemplary status of this picture, we might say that in *Camera Lucida* the quintessential photographed subject is the mother.

Barthes would resist my last phrase—not “the mother,” but rather “my mother,” he would say. And he does say that quite emphatically in the text: “[nor] would I reduce my mother to the Mother.... In the Mother, there was a radiant, irreducible core: my mother.... To the Mother-as-Good, she had added that grace of being an individual soul” (74-75). If I don’t here respect Barthes’s otherwise quite moving insistence on his mother’s singularity, it is because in examining the photographed subject in *Camera Lucida*, I am struck by its similarity to the position of the mother or, as Barthes would say, “the Mother.”

Back in the only chapter where Barthes inhabits the position of “He Who Is Photographed,” he writes: “the Photograph represents that very subtle moment when ... I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object” (14). In the course of the book, “He Who Is Photographed” becomes “She Who Is Photographed”; the son flees this position and attaches it definitively to his mother. Upon rereading Barthes’s description of the experience of being photographed, I notice that it might also describe the experience of being a mother (“I am a subject who feels she is becoming an object”).

I want to pick up the perspective Barthes drops, to pick it up where he has dropped it, in the mother’s lap. I want to pick it up as the mother’s perspective, and try to inhabit it for a while. I’d like to write about photography from the standpoint of the photographed mother.

In *Camera Lucida*, that position is characteristically silent: not only is his mother dead at the time of the book’s writing, but, he tells us, “during the whole of our life together, she never made a single ‘observation’” (69). The mother is defined in this book precisely as never doing that which the author does—observe and comment. In fact, the very paragraph in which Barthes praises his mother for refraining from ever making “observations” begins with the words “I observed,” to refer to what he saw when he looked at her in the photograph.² He observes; she does not: she is observed.

Barthes’s mother, the subject of the quintessential photograph, makes no comment. Barthes himself begins to speak of his experience of being

photographed and then changes the subject. If the position of the photographed subject seems to lead to silence in this book, it is surely because it is a position where the subject feels himself becoming an object. Unlike a subject, an object does not speak. I can't help thinking that the experience of the subject's becoming an object fits all too well with the movement in the book by which 'He Who Is Photographed' becomes "She," offering an example of the classic gendering of subject and object.

This classic gendering comes with the standard Freudian package. *Camera Lucida* has occasion to quote Freud on the Mother (40), and, although Barthes's use of psychoanalysis is typically delicate and unsystematic, the book still jibes with the usual psychoanalytic view of the family, in which the subject is the son and the object the mother. And so I find in *Camera Lucida* the predictable but nonetheless troubling scenario by which the man saves his subjectivity, his voice, by palming off the risk of becoming an object onto the mother.

Predictable is indeed the word for it: since I am both a psychoanalytic and a feminist critic, it is all too predictable that I should produce such a reading. If that were all there was to my reading of *Camera Lucida*, it would certainly not be worth doing here. Although I have been disrespectful in reducing his finely sketched mother to the Mother, I want to stop now and pay my respects to Barthes, to assume my debt to this book, and to reveal why I'm talking about it here, at the beginning of this essay.

My suggestion that Barthes abandons an uncomfortable position should be placed in the context of my admiration for *Camera Lucida*'s considerable daring, for its presumption that his subjective experience counts as knowledge for others. That he might shy away from one of the strands of that experience is of niggling concern when compared to the path he opens up for those of us who, like Barthes, would presume that our subjective experience—particularly our subjective experience of photography—might also count as knowledge.

If I begin here with a reading of *Camera Lucida*, it is, to be sure, in order to make myself more comfortable. It allows me to begin by showing you my professional persona, the feminist and psychoanalytic critic, the reader of Roland Barthes, the very sort of person authorized to make observations in a book published by a university press. But my reading of Barthes is also a way of deferring, offsetting, hedging the writing I have committed myself to here. I have contracted to write here not as a reader of Barthes, not as a professor of theory, but as a photographed mother. And—whereas doing a reading of Barthes makes it easy to write, words and ideas fairly tumbling onto the screen—the thought of

publishing a text about photographs of me and my children threatens to reduce me to silence.

It is no wonder that I turn to *Camera Lucida*. I've written on Barthes's book before, the only other time I wrote about photography. That piece appeared in a book with a photograph on its cover, a photograph of a birth.³ The mother in the birth photograph could certainly be seen as a subject becoming an object: while her body looms large in the photo, she has no head; in fact everyone in the picture has a head (nurse, baby, doctor) except the mother. While her head is missing, there is a head attached to her body, her son's (the picture was taken at the moment his head emerged from the "birth canal"). I spoke about this photograph in that book, but I did not mention that I was the mother in the picture. Rather than speak as the photographed subject, like Barthes I made observations from the spectator's point of view.

Since it's already been published, I'm not reproducing that photo here. I would like instead to show you another photograph of the subject becoming a mother, one that even more dramatically portrays the mother as object. I suppose I could say that this is a picture of me, but that doesn't feel right. I would be more comfortable saying it's a picture of my belly, which makes it more a picture of something attached to me. I'm eight months pregnant, at my monthly obstetrical check-up, where I've gone with Dick Blau, the father, who took this picture, as he did the one on the book cover, and as he did all the photographs I will discuss here.



Dick Blau, 1995.

I take this picture as the very emblem of the mother becoming an object because of the measuring tape, because of the way we think of numbers as the very measure of “objectivity.” Since I’ve already invoked the feminist critique of the objectification of women (in my reading of *Camera Lucida* above), and since I’m talking about being turned into an object, you might think that I’m complaining here about being objectified. So I want to make it clear that I’m not complaining. In fact, I’m bragging.

I like to call this photo “The Prize Watermelon.” I imagine the viewer impressed by my belly’s size; I imagine it being measured at the county fair; when I show you this photograph, I’m proudly displaying the big belly I grew.

My caption for the photograph suggests a relation to my body somehow like a farmer’s relation to her prized produce. This is a way of embracing my objectification, not simply becoming an object, but rather doubling into subject and object: I am at once the farmer and her watermelon. Putting my “fruitfulness” on display, I am, in short, proud to be a mother.

The desire to be a mother (which I would here distinguish from the desire to have a child) might be precisely the wish to become this sort of impressive object: the sort of object that, according to psychoanalysis, our mothers once were for us. While such fantasies are common, they seem better left unspoken. Like Barthes, we prefer to admire the silent mother. To speak one’s pleasure in being taken for that magical object called Mother is to display an unsightly narcissism, a narcissism which may be inevitable when the photographed mother speaks.

Narcissism is indeed the word for it. The photographed subject speaks from a position that is literally narcissistic, the position of someone looking at an image of herself. I see now why Barthes might have fled that position. To remain too long, to be too interested in one’s own image, is to fall into the trap of Narcissus.

When Barthes does briefly discuss photographs of himself, he complains that he never likes them. I imagine this is the most common sort of observation made by the photographed subject: She is most likely to say “I don’t like that picture of me.” While this is undoubtedly a resistance to objectification (that object is not me), it might also be a strategy to evade Narcissus’s fate. We gaze at our image and insistently reject it, refusing to love it.

While this might get us out of the classic position of Narcissus, it leaves us with a common form of vanity. In his chapter on “He Who Is Photographed” Barthes writes: “What I want ... is that my image ...

should always coincide with my (profound) ‘self’” (12). We reject our images because we would so love to see our “self”;⁴ our rejection of our images actually manifests our love for our self.

Barthes’s complaint goes on to specify that his image and his self “never coincide” because the image is “heavy” while his self is “light.”⁵ Barthes’s writing, whatever the topic, quite consistently privileges the light over the heavy, and here as elsewhere the pair of terms carries a range of symbolic and figurative meanings.⁶ But when he uses these terms to reject his photographic image, their concrete sense comes to mind. For all its theoretical subtlety, his complaint thus recalls one of the more common themes of vanity⁷ and prompts me to show you a photograph I had decided not to include, an otherwise wonderful picture, though I don’t like how heavy I look in it.



Dick Blau, 1991.

A few years ago Dick showed this photograph in Europe and came home to report that a psychoanalyst had found its Oedipal resonances disturbing. I liked the idea of shocking a psychoanalyst, but a month or so later as Dick was preparing to exhibit this same picture here in Milwaukee, I realized that I too was disturbed by the photo. While I did not mind people knowing that my son and I lie around naked together, I didn’t exactly like the idea of neighbors and colleagues seeing my unduly large belly. In this one, no tape measure and no pride; I’m not pregnant.

My feelings about this photograph contrast neatly with my exhibitionist

pleasure in “The Prize Watermelon”: whereas the tumescent belly fills me with pride, I feel shame in displaying one that is soft and flaccid. In the first picture, my belly sticks up; in the second, my breasts hang down. Such corporeal ups and downs are not without relation to the light and the heavy—the light rises, the heavy sinks. I’m struck by the phallic dimensions of my pride and shame. While my narcissism delights in the image of me as phallic mother, my vanity shrinks from the sight of my fallen flesh.

The photograph that shames me has given us serious and repeated pause. Dick and I keep finding ourselves unable to decide whether to show it—no other photo has caused us this kind of trouble. Throughout our conversations about it, we have not been disagreeing with one another; rather we have both been of two minds about what to do. The issues are always the same: both of us really like this photograph as statement and composition, but neither of us likes how heavy I look in it. Three years ago when Dick was preparing to exhibit locally, we had several such discussions, going back and forth about what to do. Finally we decided that not to show this unflattering image betrayed the spirit of naked honesty that is one of our family values; so we showed it.

Nevertheless, just last week we had the same discussion about whether or not to include it in this essay. And we seemed to reach a decision not to show it. We reasoned that, whereas an exhibit was ephemeral, once the photo was published it would be in a sense permanently on display—and that seemed like just too much exposure.

What clinched my decision not to publish this picture was imagining my parents’ horror at seeing it, at seeing me expose myself that way, in public. (Since I now seem to have decided to publish it, I hope my parents never find this essay.) The thought of my parents as spectators suggests the peculiar way in which this is a “family photograph.” A conventional family photograph is precisely the sort of thing one would send to relatives who live out of town: grandparents would want a photo of their daughter and grandson. They would want it not only to look at it themselves, but to show their friends, to show off. The family photograph conventionally traffics in bragging and pride.

The photo of Max and me on the couch is not the sort of thing grandparents show their friends, and thus not a conventional family photo. But my vision of parental shame reveals that this photograph still functions within the realm of the family. Family photos are in fact all about showing, about taking the privacy of family life and exhibiting it to a public gaze (if only to friends and relatives). The family photo is intended to induce pride by showing a private life for public admiration,

but the family photo can also produce shame by exhibiting privates that shouldn't be seen in public.

Although I seem to have decided to publish this picture, I'd like to focus on the repeated difficulty of that decision. I take the repetition as a sign that my problem with this photograph—whatever fantasies I might have of bold decisiveness—is just not going to go away. And I wonder if what troubles me about this photo may not, after all, be related to what troubled the psychoanalyst.

When the psychoanalyst saw this picture of a son and mother lying naked together, he thought about the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex makes the mother's body taboo, prohibits our finding it desirable; the taboo makes us uncomfortable with the mother's nakedness, introduces an element of disgust into our viewing of that body. Perhaps my objection to the picture seems different because I am viewing from the perspective of the photographed mother; I experience the disgust at that naked body as my own shame. But I'm struck by how the foci of that shame (the large, soft belly and breasts) are the very parts of the body most connoted maternal. Is this body undesirable because, looking too maternal, it elicits the Oedipal taboo?

While I don't want to discount this Oedipal reading of my shame, I also must confess that for me it makes the photo less, not more, disturbing. Interpreting the body's excesses as generically maternal tempers the shame I feel about the specificity of that body as my own. Barthes insisted that we not reduce his mother to the Mother. Although earlier I chose to make theoretical hay by not respecting his insistence, I want here to return to his caution because I see how my theorizing is not only reductive but defensive. Contemplating a photo of his mother, Barthes observes that, beyond the Mother, his mother "had added that grace of being an individual soul." I must likewise admit here that to the generic problem of seeing the Mother naked, this photograph adds the shame of my individual body, its particular weight.

Reducing my body to that of the Mother makes it easier for me to bear its heaviness. Barthes, on the other hand, finds the Mother a heavy, crude concept, which his particular mother lightens by "adding grace." *Camera Lucida* tells the story of how Barthes looked through and rejected a slew of pictures of his mother until he finally found the one photograph which for him exemplified both her and photography. Only one of the photographs could coincide with her self, her individual soul. And that was a picture of her as a little girl.

"Starting from her latest image ... I arrived ... at the image of a child: I stare intensely at the Sovereign Good of childhood, of the mother, of

the mother-as-child" (71). To the Mother, this image adds the grace and lightness of the child. In a way, the picture of Max and me on the couch does the same thing. But rather than the mother-as-child, here we see the mother-and-child, the child's lightness juxtaposed with the mother's heaviness. As I look at this photo, I find myself sharing Barthes's preference for lightness, experiencing the difference between these two bodies as my lack, thanks perhaps to an aesthetic that reinforces the sense that more is less.

What disturbs me in this spectacle of a mother's body and a child's body naked together is not, *pace* the psychoanalyst, the possibility of incest. When I see those bodies together, framed by the symmetries of the windows, mirroring each other in the similarity of their position, that mirroring makes comparison and contrast inevitable. And I suffer from the comparison.

The insistent symmetry of this photograph creates the expectation of balance between the two bodies and produces an uncomfortable awareness of their difference. My sense of shame at looking so different from Max here perhaps explains why another photograph of the two of us, one where we look strikingly similar, gives me so much pleasure.

In this picture, we are no longer so indecently exposed. While the living room photo is suffused with the light of the outside world, its large windows open, the bathroom's single window is dark and closed. Here in the most private part of the home, nakedness returns to its proper place, not only because nakedness belongs in the bathroom rather than in the relatively public space of the living room, but because now only the child is naked. Conventional family photos show naked children, not naked parents, and the classic place for the naked child is the bathtub.

The two photos frame us quite differently. While Max and I are together on the black couch, he is alone in the white bathtub. In the bath photo, Max and I are balanced in opposite corners of the frame: my head in the upper left, his in the lower right. The symmetries of this composition do not demand equivalence between our two bodies but benefit instead from our relative sizes. Rather than face each other, Max and I face the same way. Our bodies seem not disproportionate but literally in proportion: he reproduces me in miniature.

A friend of mine calls this "the picture where Max and Jane have the same face."⁸ While on the couch the bodies shock and their difference unsettles, here in the bathroom it's the faces. Their similarity is positively uncanny.

"In a certain photograph," writes Barthes, "I have my father's sister's 'mug.'"⁹ This sentence is *Camera Lucida's* only mention of a photo of



Dick Blau, 1990.

Barthes outside the chapter “He Who Is Photographed.” It appears in a chapter called “Lineage,” in the middle of a passage that proposes that “the Photograph sometimes makes appear ... a genetic feature.... The Photograph gives a little truth ... the truth of lineage” (103).

Earlier in the book, Barthes says he does not want to write about the institution of the family (74): “Lineage” deals with the family not as institution, but as something genetic, bodily, biological. And this animal sense of family echoes in the word Barthes uses for the face he shares with his aunt. “Mug” here translates the French “*museau*,” which is slang for human face but more commonly and literally means “muzzle” or “snout,” the front part of certain animals’ heads. Barthes’s muzzle reminds me that our household name for the picture of Max and me in the bathroom is “The Wolf Family.”

Our pet title for the photo picks up on the striking family resemblance between Max and me. If, as my friend says, Max and I have the same face, it’s not only because we look alike but also because we’re making the same face. With two such similar faces making the same expression, the expression itself seems to be a genetic feature, its hostility an instinctual response.

While the genetic resemblance makes this unquestionably an image of family, this is not an orthodox family photo. Although suspicion and hostility are frequently experienced in families, they are not usually represented in family photographs. The subjects here are too unsociable

for a proper family image and seem to resist, or at least resent, being photographed.

The idea of a “wolf family” suggests that here the family is not domesticated but rather captured by the photographic gaze. The mother and child look like unwilling subjects of display, resentful of the photograph’s trespass into this private space. Our look says, “Get out of here.”

Lying on the couch, the mother and child expose too much for a polite family photograph; here we are too protective of our privacy. Although our bodies are conventionally decent in this picture, our faces suggest something was not meant to be seen. If family photography makes the private public and sociable, this picture sees that as an intrusion.

The intrusion begins with the photographer; he is the object of our hostile gaze. While here the photographer is literally the father, the “wolf family” views him as an outsider, not a member of the pack. And Max’s striking appearance as my reproduction in miniature even suggests the father’s genetic irrelevance.

In most families, the father is the photographer. Not usually in the pictures, the father-photographer stands outside the image of the family. He is not simply outside the image but its master: the father-photographer directs the family picture, framing and composing the mother and children.

As a father photographing his family, Dick has assumed this role. Because his family photographs are his artwork, the role is exacerbated. In taking photographs of his family life intended for exhibition, publication, and even sale, he raises the public-private stakes implicit in all family photography. Making images of his family for public displays, Dick places himself between family and world, representing both the family to the world and the intrusion of the world into the family. This is a pretty damn conventional role for a father to play.

All the players in the bath photo—father, mother, child—are in our most traditional places. But in portraying the mother and child’s resentment of the father, this is hardly a conventional family picture. With its combination of traditional roles and hostile resistance, “The Wolf Family” could be said to expose the patriarchal relations underpinning polite family photography.

The subjects’ hostility may also suggest another equally conventional if not so photogenic dynamic. The father-photographer has entered a space of mother-son intimacy and that intrusion is resented: “Go away so we can be alone together.” Perhaps that psychoanalyst was right to worry about Max and me.

If I’ve come close to concurring with the psychoanalyst, it may be be-

cause up till now I haven't been speaking from my experience as subject; I've been reading this photograph as a spectator instead. I'm beginning to see how easy it is to slip into that position. Let me now speak as the photographed mother.

While as a spectator I find myself producing feminist and psychoanalytic readings, as the mother I see in this picture the texture of our home life. The photograph was taken on a Sunday evening during Max's weekly bath. I'm usually the one giving him his bath, and often, when Dick's finished the dishes, he appears in the bathroom, camera in hand. I am generally glad to see him arrive with his camera, always hoping for another beautiful picture of my son, but sometimes I do get annoyed if he gets in the way as I'm washing Max's hair. I don't remember the actual moment of this picture, or why I regarded Dick with such hostility. Just recently he and I were talking about the photograph because I thought I would include it here, and I voiced my puzzlement at Max's and my expression: "Were we angry at you that evening?" Dick laughed: "I made you two look at me that way." He explained that he opened the bathroom door and commanded us to look at him, knowing that a command would produce in both of us the same immediate, instinctive response—momentary but dramatic hostility. Dick used to be a theater director, and he knows how to get what he wants from actors. By sounding like a patriarch, he produced a tableau of resentment from the subjects of patriarchal authority. The response was so fleeting, I never even knew I'd participated in a drama.

"I imagine," writes Barthes, "that the essential gesture of the [photographer] is to surprise something or someone ... revealing what was so well hidden that the actor himself was unaware or unconscious of it" (32). The word "actor" here suggests Barthes shares Dick's understanding of the affinity between photographer and theater director.

If Barthes had said "the person" rather than "the actor," this revelation of something "unconscious" would lead to a psychoanalytic version of truth, to the kind of Oedipal reading with which I briefly flirted. When we read that something "well hidden" has been revealed, we tend to take this as the very sign of truth, but Barthes's word "actor" implies that what is revealed is not a personal truth, but something the person lends her body to portray.

Which doesn't mean it isn't true, but that it is true the way theater can be true: resonant human truths are portrayed even though the actors are conventionally "lying," that is, speaking in character rather than as themselves. The patriarchal melodrama in the bath photo does not reveal some personal truth about Max and me but is rather a piece of theater

we have enacted all unawares. Although as a spectator I can appreciate the truth of this drama, it is not part of my experience as a subject.

Family photographs are normally taken to represent the particular family. But Dick didn't shoot "The Wolf Family" solely for that reason. Seeing the bathroom as a set and us as a theater troupe, he stages an archetypal family. Not a conventional family portrait, "The Wolf Family" instead portrays the conventional family.

Dick's theatrical sense of the family probably has something to do with his having grown up in the theater: his mother is an actress, his father a director. But *Camera Lucida's* use of the word "actor" to describe the photographed subject, as well as its consistent use of "spectator" to name the photo's viewer, means that Dick's theatrical sense of photography is not simply idiosyncratic. At the very least it suggests a congruence between Dick and Barthes, who tells us in his autobiography that "the Theater" is "[a]t the crossroads of [his] entire *oeuvre*," that "spectacle is the universal category" in which he sees the world.¹⁰

Dick has always said that his photography derives from his work in theater, but I never understood what he meant by this until I brought Barthes's description of the photographer to bear on Dick's photography. That *Camera Lucida* should help me appreciate Dick's perspective is ironic. Dick does not like this book; he is offended by its dismissal of the photographer's point of view. As a matter of fact, it occurs to me that I may have chosen to approach Dick's photos with Barthes's book in hand precisely because of this resistance to the photographer's point of view.

At the beginning of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes proclaims his independence from "the troupe who deal with Photography-according-to-the-Photographer" (10). But ten chapters later he makes an exception to that rule: "I imagine (this is all I can do, since I am not a photographer) that the essential gesture of the [photographer] is to surprise something or someone (through the little hole of the camera), and that this gesture is therefore perfect when it is performed unbeknownst to the subject being photographed" (32).

Unlike Barthes, I don't have to imagine the photographer's gesture. Another photograph of Max and me actually shows Dick taking our picture, thanks to a mirror. In this photo neither Max nor I manifest any awareness of Dick, who is behind us, his one visible eye shut, the other presumably looking through his Leica which is focused on us.

This picture seems to reflect the structure of the classic family photograph. By including his image, Dick lets us see the father-photographer, the figure conventionally left outside the frame, observing unobserved. The viewer can see him here looking at the subjects who aren't looking at him.



Dick Blau, 1986.

Once again, we are all three in our most traditional places. The baby narcissistically contemplates his own image; the mother holds and supports her son, gazing admiringly at his image; the father is at a distance, capturing mother and child with his technology but not touching us, not interacting with us. The entire little family is centered on the baby's image, mother and father both helping construct that image in their typically differing ways.

Although I'm not sure how much I like seeing myself as the conventional mother here, I really like the shirt I'm wearing. As frivolous as it might seem, I connect the writing on my shirt with Dick's sporting a camera. Not just Mom and Dad here, we both display the means of our expression, the symbols of our respective trades: this photo includes not only the father-photographer but also the mother-writer. While no one else may be able to read the shirt this way, I like to think it says that the woman in this 1986 photo is not just the baby's proud mother but also the author of a book on Jacques Lacan, which came out a few months before Max did.

Perhaps that explains why I see this photograph as a dramatization of Lacan's "Mirror Stage."¹¹ "The Mirror Stage" is about the moment in which the baby meets his image. Lacan specifies that the baby looking at himself in the mirror cannot yet stand on his own, but is standing with the help of "some support, human or artificial." The support makes possible an image that is more mature, more together, more erect than

the baby really is. In this photo, Max is two-and-a-half months old; it would be nearly a year until he could stand on his own. In this photo, I play the quintessential supporting role for his false and narcissistically pleasing image of self.

As it turns out, Barthes too associates Lacan's "Mirror Stage" with a family photograph. In his autobiography, underneath a photo of a woman holding a baby, Barthes has placed the caption "The mirror stage: 'you are that.'"¹² The baby is presumably Barthes, the woman his mother; their gazes are aimed in the same direction. The caption implies that, like Max and me, Barthes and his mother are both looking at the baby's mirror image.

The caption further suggests that the mother is saying "you are that," thus teaching the baby to recognize his image as himself.¹³ This gently reinterprets Lacan's formulation, giving the mother a leading role in the historic moment when the baby takes his image for himself. Because Baby Barthes in the photo is not pretending to stand, not producing an image that pretends to more than he can really accomplish, the moment does not carry the Lacanian sense of the image's tragic falsity and the mother's role seems innocuous enough.

Looking back at Max and me in the mirror, I see myself like Barthes's mother taking the active role. But Max *is* "standing," and my activity does not seem so innocent. Lacan locates the onset of the mirror stage at around six months of age, when a baby first wants to be seen standing. Here, more than three months ahead of schedule, it must have been my idea to stand him up. In this picture I can see myself as the worst sort of pushy mirror-stage mother.

Barthes's use of "the mirror stage" shows us the mother in a scene usually imaged as a solo performance. A closer look would discern yet another presence, beyond the mother-child dyad. This third presence appears in the sentence that "The Mirror Stage" uses to introduce its description of the infant confronting his image: "This event," writes Lacan, "has often made me reflect upon the startling spectacle of the infant in front of the mirror."¹⁴ The third figure—the one who views the spectacle, finds it "startling," and "reflects upon" it—is Lacan himself, whose reflection has brought us "The Mirror Stage," his most famous theoretical contribution.

Dick's mirror photo shows something like the "spectacle" Lacan "often reflects upon." But this mirror image also includes the gaze that reflects upon the spectacle. When I imagine that this photo represents Lacan's "Mirror Stage," I like to think that Dick's inclusion of himself as part of the image somehow reveals Lacan's theoretical gaze, bringing the third

player in the drama to the stage, allowing us to see the shadowy figure who observes the well-lit image of baby and supporting mother. And this strikes me as a more complete picture of the system that supports the baby's image.

Reading the photo as a further elaboration of the mirror stage depends upon seeing the father-photographer as somehow analogous with the psychoanalytic theorist. I find this analogy enormously seductive, whispering a grand theorization that would connect the mirror stage to both family photography and the Oedipal triangle. I start to fantasize myself as the author of the great psychoanalytic theory of images, which would explain how the image of the self is constructed in the family. But as soon as I try to work it out, the fantasy fades and my writing grinds to a halt.

Perhaps there is a less grandiose, more idiosyncratic explanation for why I see the father's place in this photo as Lacan's place. Years ago I wrote a book about French feminism and psychoanalysis in which I staged the relation between the two in Oedipal terms, casting Lacan in the role of the father. At the time I was not a mother and the Oedipal relation I was interested in was not the classic one that's been dogging me here, but the daughter's version. I was writing that book at the moment I met Dick. One day, looking at his photographs, I found this picture I thought would be perfect for the cover of the book I planned to call *The Daughter's Seduction*.

That's Dick's daughter in the foreground, the very image of girl beauty and innocence, lost in her contemplation of a few wisps of grass. Like the mirror stage photo, this one has a foreground and a background, and like Max and me in the mirror, Anna seems oblivious to what is behind her. Once again the background contains an image of the father. On the ground, in a posture that seems somehow reminiscent of lovers, are a father and a daughter—Dick's best friend Jake, and Jake's daughter Laura, Anna's best friend. I see this romantic background as the unconscious, dreamlike in its softer focus and gorgeous light. The daughter, innocent in the foreground, seems unaware of the Oedipal scene behind her.

Although there are no mirrors, here, Dick has found another way to include the father in the image. In place of the mirror, he has a stand-in—a figure identified with himself, both as his best friend and as the father of a daughter. The relation between the background father-and-daughter could be said to mirror the relation between the unseen father-photographer and his daughter. The inclusion of the father in the image allows the photo to dramatize and gloss the erotic exchange that appears in its more conven-



Dick Blau, 1978.

tional form in the foreground, where the father-photographer focuses our gaze on his daughter's delectable skin, sensuous hair, and pouty lips.

The image in the foreground belongs to a large and over-familiar genre: fathers' adoring photos of their daughters' innocent beauty. The background stages the unconscious of the genre. Juxtaposing the manifest and the latent, this photograph both reproduces that genre and reflects upon the taboo eros that underlies it.

While my relation to this picture was not familial, it was immediate and intense: I had professional designs upon it. I thought it the very image of "the daughter's seduction," with its different levels echoing the ambiguities and psychoanalytic resonances of the writing I was doing. I wanted it for my book's cover and asked Dick if I could use it. At first he liked the idea, but a couple of days later he told me that, as much as he regretted it, he couldn't let me use the photo. What stopped him was the thought of Anna.

Not the girl in the image, taken a few years before our conversation, but the girl in his life. Anna and I hadn't yet met, and he was afraid she might not like gracing the cover of a book called *The Daughter's Seduction*. As much as he wanted us to publish together, he wanted more to avoid anything that might make Anna resent me. The photographer wanted to publish this picture; the father cared more about his daughter's feelings.

The father won out. Which suggests that, however much these photos are Dick's artistic work, they are also still very much family photographs.

Not simply because they are images of family members, but because they never can be completely outside the family. Family photography is not just about how the family looks in the pictures; it's also about how the pictures look in the family. And as great as Anna would have looked on the cover of my book, the fact of her appearance there might not have looked so good to her.

Like all the photographs I've discussed here, this one portrays people Dick loves while at the same time catching those loved ones in poses that convey classic family dramas. When I asked to put this picture on the book cover, I wasn't thinking about his family and its actual dramas, about Anna's real relation to her father; I only saw this picture as an eloquent portrayal of the generic daughter's Oedipus complex.

My theoretical gaze also sees *Camera Lucida* as perfectly Oedipal. Like the psychoanalyst viewing Max and me on the couch, I feel mildly and agreeably scandalized when I read in that book that Barthes lived with his mother his whole life (75). But in the very same chapter that contains this confession, I notice he insists that while such a theoretical understanding can explain the "generality," "the Mother," it misses *his* mother, the individual being he loved: "it is because she was who she was that I lived with her" (75).

In a startling move, Barthes does not show us the photograph of his mother that he makes central to the book, the picture that for him captures both the essence of the woman he loved all his life and the theoretical essence of the photography. "I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph," baldly asserts Barthes (73) about the photograph he devotes pages to describing and analyzing, thereby adding to his analysis an absolute insistence in its, and her, singularity. While the book's lengthy discussion of this photograph in fact makes theory by seeing generalities in the picture, Barthes's refusal to show it resists its reduction to those generalities: "no more than I would reduce my family to the Family, would I reduce my mother to the Mother" (74).

The theoretical designs I had on Dick's picture of Anna correspond to the relation Barthes's reader would have to the picture of his mother. Back then, Dick's photos were for me only portraits of "the Family," not of "my family." Now I no longer have the luxury of forgetting the particular family, and I find my responses as a reader don't jibe that well with my responses as a mother. The reader sees the generic drama of family; the mother thinks of the individuals.

In drafting this essay, I have experienced the split between mother and critic most acutely when choosing which photographs to write about. In the hope of creating a text that would be valued professionally, I have



Dick Blau, 1997.

made my pictorial choices based on theoretical and writerly demands. But as a mother this leaves me with a problem.

I haven't shown you my daughter. She was the seed in "The Prize Watermelon," but now she's a girl out in the world, a wonderful girl who hasn't yet remarked that I have pictures of only her big brother on the walls of my study, none of her. I'm hoping to get some of her up before she notices.

Since I'm even prouder of her than I was of my protruding belly, it would give me pleasure to show her to you. But what really compels me to do so is imagining her reading this some day. How could I explain to her that I sacrificed her for compositional unity? As I was writing this essay, I kept trying to find a way to get from the themes of this text to a picture of her; I never did. So, although it may be bad form, before I go, I gotta show you my Ruby.

Notes

¹Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 9-10.

²Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 1980), 107-109. The original French has the verb "observer," an exact

cognate of our English verb “observe” to match the later “observation” (in both languages). The English translator has obscured the resonance by translating the initial verb as “I studied.”

³Jane Gallop, “The Prick of the Object,” in *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 149-160.

⁴Barthes’s French word “moi” could also be given the more psychoanalytic translation “ego,” *Chambre Claire*, 26.

⁵In the context of photography, it must be noted that the French word he uses, “léger,” unlike its English translation, does not mean the opposite of dark but only the opposite of heavy (*Camera Lucida*, 12; *Chambre Claire*, 27).

⁶“Heavy,” for example, is in this passage linked to “motionless” and the ideological; “light” to dispersion and the “zero degree.”

⁷This is, to be sure, a theme for Barthes as well. In his autobiography, he places this caption above a photograph of himself as a young boy: “Sudden mutation of the body: changing (or appearing to change) from slender to plump. Ever since, perpetual struggle with this body to return it to its essential slenderness”—*Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 30.

⁸Lynne Joyrich, various personal conversations.

⁹*Camera Lucida*, 103; *Chambre claire*, 161, translation modified.

¹⁰Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 177.

¹¹Jacques Lacan, “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience,” in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 1-7.

¹²*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 25; translation, 20; translation modified. The phrase in quotation marks (originally “Tu es cela”) can be found in Lacan’s “Mirror Stage,” where it also appears in quotation marks (*Ecrits*, 7).

¹³In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes dislikes his image because it doesn’t correspond with his “self.” Here, in a book published five years earlier, we see his mother imposing the equation of self and image upon him. It is probably worth noting that between the writing of the two books, Barthes’s mother had died.

¹⁴Lacan, “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience,” 1.

