

Presented to:

Motherhood and creative practice: Maternal Structures in creative work

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Mothers!

Mothering artists!

Ask not what the avant-garde can do for you! Ask what you've already done for the avant-garde...

What not (what knot?)

Number 1: A child in the back seat of a Honda Element curving toward the bright California shadows of the underpass. Bodies lean. From the rear, in distinct and commanding tones, comes the count: *Five. Four. Three. Two. One.* At the penumbra, sharp intakes of air. Breath released at the nether end of the tunnel. A mother and child.

[Imagine now that I click to Allan Kaprow's performing a breathing piece, 1979]

Number 2: A morning ritual: Stain of coffee in the center of warm foam in a sturdy glass tumbler sitting on the counter, cooling, not drunk, while breakfasts and lunches are prepared. A child's spoon turns the brown spot of liquid into Spiral Jetty in A Coffee Cup. Look Mama.

[Here I would click to Robert Smithson drawings, c 1970]

Number 3: A mother in a library, typing. A child amusing herself at the dry erase board. The mother thinking about conceptual art. The child drawing a chair. And writing the word Chair. And sitting, thinking, chair.

[Click to Joseph Kosuth, One and Three Chairs, 1965]

Number 4: A mother awaits her kid, from pre-school to kindergarten to elementary to middle to high school, drops her off, picks her up, every day that there's school – she works from home so it's easiest for her—and besides she wanted to prove to herself that in her child's life at least, she was punctual. She has never missed a day. By this mother's count that totals 15 years or 2,800 days or 5,600 trips.

[Click to the durational performance of Tehching Hsieh, one-year performance, 1980-81]

Number 5: Upon the mother's return from her trip, a reddish rock removed illicitly from an earthwork presented to the child as demonstration of love, gesture of inclusion, a conciliatory token to assuage the child's sense of abandonment, the mother's guilt. The child takes the rock and balances it on a cushion of air, also known as the zip-lock bag, and carries it gingerly, ceremoniously, funereally even, throughout the house.

[And here I would click to Lydia Clark]

Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, Kaprow, Smithson, Kosuth, Clark.

This paper concerns art and life; mothering and contemporary art; women and the legacies of conceptualism.

Avant-garde, advanced art, conceptual art, contemporary. Whatever the nomenclature, art and artists at least since 1865 have been struggling to define their relationship to “life”. If we could plot that struggle on a graph, with ‘art’ on the vertical y -axis and ‘life’ on the horizontal x , we could plot a line that generally sloped toward the x -axis, approaching, but never quite touching, life. Our line would not run smoothly but would have peaks and troughs, highs when art seemed far from life, as in Greenberg’s prime, and lows, gently undulating toward the x -axis, as when plotting Kaprow’s happenings or Dan Graham’s architectural shelters or Barbara Smith’s *Feed Me* or the Brazilian avant-garde or Australia’s Red-Back Graphics Poster Collective or indeed Klutis and the electrification of the Soviet Union. Early conceptual art might plot quite high on our graph, institutional critique nothing if not *artful*. But a somewhat later and parallel strand of conceptualism, what Terry Smith refers to as *synthetic conceptual art*¹ drops our line back down toward the x -axis. Smith distinguishes the *analytic* impulse -- the “working on the concept of art” -- from a *synthetic* approach in which the critical methodologies of conceptual art were applied to broader subjects and experiences, what we might call “life”. The former approach was exemplified by *Art and Language*, early

¹ Mary Kelly and Terry Smith, “A Conversation about Conceptual Art, Subjectivity and the Post-Partum Document” (1995), in Alberro and Stimson, *Conceptual Art*, 450 – 58.

Joseph Kosuth, Michael Asher. The synthetic approach would include the practice of Mary Kelly as well as Bruce Nauman, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper and Merle Laderman Ukeles among many others whose projects variously introduced overt political and social content to the conceptual proposition, situating art, politics and the social on a continuum.² In conversation with Mary Kelly, Terry Smith recalls the promise of conceptual art, this “doing work” in which avant-garde art embodied theory and engaged with politics.

In thinking about the avant-garde, I want us to reconsider its roots in military strategy: Avant-garde, the front line of combat, that old military term from medieval French, for the ones who prepare the ground for the armies that follow, those on the frontlines risking death, changing lives.

Now, one aspect of the military avant-garde has been forgotten: at the forefronts of military campaigns there were harbingers: Harbinger, we understand the word now to mean that which forebodes future woe. But in its earlier use, a harbinger was one who was in front of the first lines of warriors, and whose task it was to find safe harbor – accommodation – after the battle. If the troops were not bivouacking out in the cold, they would require lodging: Whether by appropriating manors, villages, taverns or inns, the harbinger’s job was to find a temporary home for commanders and their armies and, in the search for room or barn, inadvertently foretelling the coming of the military to the surrounding villages and estates. (Hence the acquired association with woe.)

² I say overt because of course the critical self reflexivity of analytic conceptualism has very often entailed a political dimension: Michael Asher’s *Painting and Sculpture from The Museum of Modern Art: Catalog of Deaccessions 1929 through 1998* immediately comes to mind.

The term avant-garde was used to describe cultural forerunners as early as 1825. In the nineteenth century the term's risks for cultural workers were real: For those artists whose experimentation failed, there was obscurity and destitution, madness even: hence the stereotype of the starving artist that persisted well into the 20th century. For the few who were finally embraced, there was heroism, honor, valor, worthy medals for the suffering artist whose independence, sacrifice and persistence won through, though often posthumously— like dead soldiers, their namesakes.

Let us consider the avant-garde's repressed quasi-domestic aspect—the harbinger's search for a place to sleep—as it applies to art: It returns, in the domesticity of the cultural avant-garde of postwar American art. Post WW II, the global cultural center shifted from Europe to the US, from Paris to New York. There is a shift too in mood and class assignation, the avant-garde artist is neither the aristocrat, nor is he (sic) the starving, tortured genius. If Pollock's image contains the last vestige of this anguished state, what emerges in the 1960s is, as Allan Kaprow says, a different kind of artist:

On the street they are indistinguishable from the middle class from which they come and toward whose mores—practicality, security, and self-advancement—they tend to gravitate.

The men and women of today's generation [of artists]... are almost all college educated and are frequently married, with children. ³

³ Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, University of California Press, 2003, 48

So where are the women of this generation [of avant-garde artists], the women who've been to college, the women who are artists with children, the mothering artists? When I think of women of the avant-garde of the 1960s, the motherless ones come to mind:

Carolee Schneeman, Hannah Wilke, Lynda Benglis, Eva Hesse, Adrian Piper.

Mary Kelly, in discussing the genesis of *Post-Partum Document* recalls:

As I watched the migration of French theory to the UK [in the early 1970s], and more importantly, from literature to film, I couldn't help wondering what possibilities it held for transforming the fields of art and art history, and especially, with regard to my own work, for rethinking conceptual art, which was dominated by the kind of positivist linguistics that Art & Language espoused. For me, their move from interrogating the object to interrogating the interrogation itself made no sense without a theory of the subject, which is something I tried to address in *Post-Partum Document*.⁴

Going from thinking about 'language' to thinking about how one 'learns language' seemed a logical extension of the line of inquiry under conceptual art, but as Kelly has elsewhere said, the other shoe never dropped.⁵ For Art and Language, language remained an abstraction; for Kelly, it was intimately connected to her life as a mother and her

⁴ Mary Kelly, et al. Tate online conversation, 'On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Period of Time.' <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/talk/mary-kelly-conversation-hans-ulrich-obrist/on-passage-few-people-through>
Accessed May 2015

⁵ *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, ed. Jennie Klein and ed. Myrel Chernick, Demeter Press: Ontario, Canada, 2011, 21-22

urgent desire to engage the philosophical and political discourse around the formation of the subject, discourses she found not in conceptual art but in the women's movement.

Mary Kelly's practice is exemplary of *synthetic conceptualism*, under which the axes of "art" and "life" gain a third dimension that is "living critically" or as Allan Kaprow would have it, "living attentively". Here our model becomes three dimensional, a volume rather than a line on a plane, a form that acquires folds, that crumples, grows thick, round, fulsome even, and which sometimes even turns in on itself. The mothering artist can be found on just this terrain.

"Lifelike art did not merely label life as art. It was continuous with that life, inflecting, probing, testing, and even suffering it, but always attentively" so said Allan Kaprow.⁶ One of the hallmarks of the success of this artistic attentiveness, this consciousness, one might say, is precisely that having lived, having been that attentive figure, this alt avant-garde, as I like to call it, disappears.

The alt avant-garde has been/is being successful in its goals precisely because of its invisibility. Like certain astronomical phenomena it is difficult to see the alt avant-garde itself, but we can register its presence by the energy it emits, by those things it absorbs and negates. Which is to say the alt avant-garde gives off an energy that has profoundly changed our culture. Imagine where we would be without it! This trick of invisibility is displacement work par excellence. Think about the most stultifying effects of postwar

⁶ Kaprow, op. cit., 206

heteronormativity, the nuclear family, and how impossible it was to live up to its ideals: we don't even *care* about the nuclear family anymore: people make family in a multitude of acceptable ways that are in part the product of a feminist negotiation of the dissolution of that impossible family model and the multiplication of divorced and remarried and single mothers and fathers and step children and children returning home, and single parents and LGBTI families and adopted children and on and on. Even though some of these changes to family structure are for pragmatic reasons to do with financial pressures and a widening equality gap, even so, I'd like to assert that the old *ideals* and aspirations have indeed withered away (if not the state itself) and that this hegemonic shift is a measure of the effect of the women's movement, including its intersection with art.

So, I've argued that there are two aspects of avant-garde practice, one that seeks change in itself, another that seeks change in society. Of course, these strands are intertwined to varying degrees, thus an avant-garde may *reflect* societal change, (like the impressionists reflecting an increasing awareness of small increments of time); or it may *identify* an emergent societal change and in reproducing, amplify that change. But, it seems to me, those practices that seek to change themselves as art are more inclined to documentation, historicization, while the alt avant-garde is busy just getting on with it, without the support of institutional structures that help us remember them.

Hal Foster has argued that we know the historic avant-garde through knowing the neo-avant-garde; but neither '-garde' in his narrative has much to do with the women's movement, which was not a successor, an inheritor, as the neo avant-garde was to the

historic; rather it was conterminous and its forms I would assert were more integrated with life and more affectively influential upon life. As cause and effect of this proximity to real life, it's been marginalized if not rendered largely invisible. Consider experimental film, one of the areas of intersection between the women's movement and the cultural avant-garde: In the Riddles of the Sphinx by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen I am seduced all over again by the wide slow pans, the circular movement, the fragmentation—the formal experimentation—but also, I am shocked by how striking it is to hear tell and see 'life lived': relationships, washing-up, picking kids up from the nursery, quotidian life's important everyday matters. This is different I think from what Kaprow was getting at when he said that artists should live attentively: These daily details are not formalized or elevated to any other status nor are they instrumentalized *as* conceptual art; they simply *are*.

This invisible avant-garde/ alt avant-garde carries the torsion between the innovative and the conserving and the improvisation that is what Michel de Certeau refers to as 'making-do'⁷, strands all twined together: and in as much recalls the curious image of the forerunners in the military avant-garde, the harbingers, those looking for comforts and a place to sleep when all the dust settles. Indeed anecdotally, I can think of many artists of the contemporary alt avant-garde, who are artists working as and/or with scientists, chefs, designers, architects, political movements, teachers, *and* children. Their practice is art but an art that is dispersed throughout cultures and communities, a truly expanded field. And

⁷ See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984, 29

tellingly their work circulates outside the confines of galleries, museums, collector support and curatorial engagement.

I read Mary Kelly's online conversation organized by the Tate avidly: the recollections of women—Juliet Mitchell, Parveen Adams, Griselda Pollock—who were there, whose work was the Women's Movement of London in the 1970s. I think of the Australian equivalent in Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne: *Art and Working Life*; *Mother's Memories*, *Other's Memories*; *The Tin Sheds* at Sydney University. They were the truly radical avant-garde, artists who did indeed live attentively. This is not an exercise in what Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s called 'relational aesthetics' which relations tended largely to stay within the confines of an art context. This is my alt avant-garde: and this alt avant-garde supports and extends what Julie Stephen might call a mothering culture, an ethos of caring, nurture and support than moves synthetically well into other spheres of life beyond the institutions of art.

"Artistic activity is a game", says Nicholas Bourriaud.⁸ I am reminded of the sing-song "game" that is Louise Lawler's extraordinary birdcalls of the Great Names of art history. Yet it's not only children and artists and curators who play games, especially when the games played are for keeps: when the games played may have serious consequences – for the individual and the world, there's always the mother, playing, orchestrating, coordinating. Bourriaud places himself in the position of the mother—"The work tries to

⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Réel, 2002, 11

catch my gaze, the way the new-born child "asks for" its mother's gaze'⁹—yet never acknowledges her presence, emulating a great tradition in a history of art: mothers may upon occasion be the depicted in a painting but rarely has she been acknowledged as the avant-garde actor she actually is. For all the children's games, for all the linguistic analyses to be found in a history of the avant-garde, mothers – who are up close and personal to such things – are missing from the discourse. As Lise Halle Baggesen says, it's a *mother-shaped hole in contemporary art discourse*.¹⁰

The annals of modernity, the avant-garde, have long been critiqued for its expropriation of what was once called 'the primitive'. What we have yet to claim is the expropriation of mothering by the avant-garde. Like Mary Kelly, I'm not waiting for that shoe to drop.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ Lise Halle Baggesen, *Mothernism*
<https://lisehallerbaggesen.wordpress.com/motherism/>