

‘Train Talk’ is a collaboration by Myrel Chernick and Margaret Morgan, arising from presentations for *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics and the Anthropocene*, colloquium organized by Nathalie S. Loveless and Sheena Wilson
CoLab, Arts Based Research Studio, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada
May 11-14, 2016

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July 14, 2017 traveling from Kassel to Paris

Train Talk

MM: So you were saying the problem with the maternal is that it’s so threatening.

MC: I feel it’s threatening to people who don’t want to acknowledge their mothers’ ambivalence towards them because we continue to believe that our mothers are the ones who love us unequivocally.

I know that this show [*Documenta 14*] has gotten generally excellent reviews and I think the curator [Adam Szymczyk] did make an effort to include a range of artists from many regions, time periods and methodologies. But there’s something odd when you have an entire show [*Documenta 14*] that is devoted to migration, to the problems of history, to global politics to histories of exploitation, and to not include mothers and children—mothers and children, who, as we know, are the poorest people in the world.

MM: Yes, it’s a profound and moving and also tightly curated exhibition, and yet it has this blind spot. For as many women who are in it, the maternal is still missing.

There *was* the installation by Pélégie Gbaguidi [*The Missing Link. Dicolonisation Education by Mrs Smiling Stone*, 2017] that addresses the education of children into and through colonial oppression, in an environment of wall hangings drawn with pencil, dirt and lipstick, school desks, toys, notebooks, videos, music and historic photographs: detritus from domesticity and from the public sphere. So if the maternal isn’t center stage, at least it is there.

MC: Another work in Documenta that does address the maternal comes to mind: Manthia Diawara's film, *An Opera of the World* (2017).

MM: Yes, a major piece. The film documents an opera, dubbed the first African opera, entitled *Bintou Wéré, An Opera of the Sahel* (2007). It's an immigrant story that the film also contextualizes by introducing footage of the current refugee crisis in Syria. The protagonist of the opera, Bintou Wéré, accuses a group of men of rape. Her subsequent pregnancy becomes instrumental in the group's decision to flee local hardships in the Sahel in search of asylum in Europe. The men vie for paternity for the sake of saving themselves. Bintou Wéré is the central figure, one of strength, hope, reason and defiance. Her role was the crux of the narrative.

MC: Although she still had to die in the end. And that, after she has been raped by many men and at the beginning was called a whore.

MM: That's right. So she's as close as we get to a maternal subject and that's not the subject we want. She's abused and then becomes a martyr.

MC: This issue, the maternal, needs to be in the major shows. Which is to say that even though much of the work [in *Documenta 14*], is not in the commodity category—it's not part of the commercial art-world that circulates through the major auction houses, collector bases, and art fairs—still, the maternal has little place in it.

MM: In *Documenta* [14] it's also a question of honoring the guest, welcoming the other; and philosophically it aligns closely with questions of mothering, care, nurturance. We see questions of hospitality, migration, the one in the other. You know, the show in Germany is called 'Talking to Athens' and interpolates a Greek collection into the German exhibition and puts the German exhibition in Athens. I notice, in the reader, Derrida's work on hospitality is included. So there's plenty on the question of welcoming the guest but there isn't anything to do with the caregiving that is linked to the maternal. It's the jump from hospitality to caregiving that's not made.

MC: There is real resistance, psychologically, to the question of the maternal. How do you make questions around maternity that appeal to a larger audience? You're fighting centuries of misogyny.

In her review of the exhibition *New Maternalisms* [<https://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/sim.221/>], Jennie [Klein] compares it to New Materialism. The body is presented as material, with strategies such as documenting your life as a residency [Lenka Clayton], or placing a webcam over your bed [Dillon Paul & Lindsey Wolkowicz] for a durational family performance. Marnie Kotak's performance [*The Birth of Baby X*, 2011], where she gave birth in her gallery, uses a similar strategy.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles' early work also consisted of documentation of her life with her children. What she documented: dressing her children, feeding them, caring for them, was a way to acknowledge that that work had value, and what she came to call "Maintenance art," she then applied to the sanitation workers, and eventually the earth with her environmental work.

MM: Looking back on her work I find it extraordinary how much she expanded out of the purely maternal sphere, extrapolating maternal qualities of support and nurturance to much broader societal questions about generosity, care giving, maintenance of home, museum, the environment, the value of labor, and working people.

MC: Yes, and by that, giving value to the sanitation workers, probably the most maligned group of public employees in New York City. So it was very political too. And there was so much compassion in the documentation Laderman Ukeles did for children, workers, mothering. I'm reminded again of Diawara's film.

MM: He links documentation of an opera-about-immigration to documentation of the current refugee crisis in Lesbos: children playing music and an interview with a French social worker who was receiving Syrian refugees as they arrived. To paraphrase her, the refugees are courageous and daring and they are the heroes and those who control the

border are the criminals. Her care giving made the film cohere and pivot beautifully from art (opera) to life (Syria).

MC: Maybe we think that Manthia Diawara's *An Opera for the World* is one of the most significant works in the show.

MM: Yup, I think we do.

MC: It's a daunting question: How do you bring that ethics of care into a more general art situation? Artists working with the question of the maternal are very conscious of an art practice that is hermetic; their work has tendrils into the real world, the quotidian.

So how far do these tendrils go?

MM: In what circuits do they operate? Working in the maternal can produce a very different version of the art world. But those differences are given hierarchies of value.

MC: Absolutely. Some of the things that Crista [Donner] has done within the gallery are making those connections between art and life. But there has to be more of it and it comes down to curators being aware of it and choosing the work! Which I think is really troublesome after all these years; from when I first started working in the late 80s and now we're almost 2020. So that's what we have to come up with: the answer, Margaret. What do we do?

MM: Well, let's look at it: You started working on the maternal when you became a mother.

MC: Right.

MM: And I did the same. We were subject to the same blind spot until we saw it through our own lives. I think that's part of the problem because we too were not interested until we experienced it ourselves.

MC: And that's the culture. The nuclear family. It's only your child that counts. And that's in addition to the general misogyny, that you couldn't even acknowledge your femaleness in many ways. As an artist it was difficult enough to be a woman, let alone the fact of having kids. When I was doing sculpture, a professor asked me, 'What do you want to work with heavy metal for? Why are you trying to act like a man?'

And then there was the relationship between mothers and women in the art world who didn't have children, many of them curators, and who didn't support work around the maternal. I'm writing a book sub-chapter with Jennie [Klein]: [*Routledge Motherhood Companion*] that will include women doing maternal work in the sixties, like Niki de Saint Phalle's huge *Nanas* that you could walk into; for example, *Hon* ['she' in Swedish] [1966]. And Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Her work is a good counterbalance to Mary [Kelly]. They were working simultaneously, albeit Mary was in England at the time.

MM: Laderman Ukeles' work wasn't invoking philosophy or critical analysis; it was working in a hands-on way with people whose hands were dirty. Workers hands were dirty. Mothers' hands were dirty. I think it was a very different way of working. And while she didn't act like a radical, her work was revolutionary.

MC: It was also a reaction to the more theoretical approach which itself was a reaction to the idea that art was always to do with emotion, with expressivity. And somehow the baby got thrown out with the bathwater. I mean this reaction was that art could be – is – a theoretical process. So, how do we mesh these two? Even now there is a clash between these differing positions.

MM: And by the 1980s, feminist art practice became reduced to a split between essentialist and the anti-essentialist/constructionist position. Artists who were working more concretely with the body were critiqued or ignored by those who were working through philosophy and critical analysis. Of course there are many exceptions – Gran Fury and Act-up and the somewhat later WAC immediately come to mind, and these were practices that merged social justice, the political and the aesthetic, coming out of

civil rights, gay liberation, feminism and visual art—but I'm talking about the success of feminist art and feminism in art and how the work that was most representative of feminist practice wasn't work where the artist touched the bodies of ordinary people or even themselves but rather work—wonderful work in and of itself—that was more rarified or put through the lens of intellectual discourses and more about representations of life than about (being immersed in) life itself. So hanging out with a bunch of garbage men wasn't in sync with the kind of feminist work the art-world valued, even as little as the art-world valued feminist work at all.

MC: There was a kind of rigidity in the sense of what aspects of feminist practice were acceptable to the museums, collector bases and commercial galleries that then dominated the art-world. And when I think back on the kind of work done in Woman House and some of the other feminist collectives, you would have an opportunity for everyone to just bring in their work and share one another's practice, and then you have the problem of the art world coming in; I mean, art-making without an ostensible critical perspective will be rejected, in the same way that A.I.R. gallery has rarely been reviewed by the NY Times in its decades of exhibitions. But we're in an interesting period right now.

MM: I think of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith from the CAA conference in NY [2017] and the ecological work of Agnes Denes that we saw at *Documenta* [14] as two examples.

MC: I think what Geeta Kapur, the Indian art historian and cultural critic [at *Documenta* 14], was saying about artists who are working within diverse communities with local materials can also ameliorate the situation. That kind of work really interests me. Yet *Documenta* 14 seemed in so many ways to be looking backward.

MM: Yes, you're right. And looking backward is necessary but not sufficient.

MC: So it would have been great if more of the work that Geeta Kapur had mentioned had been included in the exhibition.

MM: Well, it's the pivot, as you say, to the future.

MC: Yes, to work within communities to create art, *forward looking* work. So the question of essentialism is kind of irrelevant now.

MM: Yes, within feminist discourses, the question of essentialism is moot.

MC: In the way that it was defined back then. But essentialism exists for women in the entire world.

MM: Yes, misogyny is the essentialist. We're already essentialized. We don't have to critique one another on that basis. I think that the notion of essentialism to which Mary [Kelly] would have subscribed was a long time ago now, say forty years ago, and she doesn't think of the world in those terms anymore either.

MC: If you look back on Carolee Schneemann's work, which was placed in the 'essentialist' basket, it's much more interesting to consider it through the question of materiality: that's really what she was doing, she was examining the body as a material, and in some ways you could say it was misogyny that caused her work to be rejected because she was a beautiful woman...

MM: Yes, and she was in your face with her embodiment.

MC: And since the male gaze [as coined by Laura Mulvey in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', 1975] was also being identified and rejected by feminist practice, it was easy to dismiss Carolee's work as recuperating or even titillating the male gaze.

MM: And I think artists in the eighties were concerned not to confuse the representation of something with the thing itself; we were concerned with the contingency of truth and its representation. When we think of Schneemann's work, she was not interested in this question about representation as such, you know questioning the truth-value of an image.

But she was definitely allowing for the discomfort of the gaze, for qualifying the gaze: It's great that Carolee won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale [2017]. So yes, we are in an interesting period.

MC: But as for the maternal, the reception has been more limited, and still is. In magazines like *Artforum*, we are still counting the number of women represented, let alone the number of women who have children or whose work addresses maternal issues. I think of Lenka Clayton who started the *Artist Residency in Motherhood* for artists who are mothers, to apply for a year's residency with a small stipend to stay home with the child and make artwork. Something like that could easily have been in this show.

MM: One of the things art can do is to posit a possibility, to show in a small way what can be done.

MC: It expands people's visions.

MM: There's Lauren Bon who transformed a brownfield near downtown LA into a field of corn, symbol of fertility and abundance, and which then became a State Park [*Not a Corn Field*, 2005-6]. It was her vision that articulated the site as a haven within the city, generating much public engagement about what kind of city LA might become. It was a work at once beautiful and invisible in the sense that to experience it, it didn't have to announce itself as art.

MC: It's actually where I see the future of art making: I think of the work of Jackie Brookner who, in Finland, with the local community, took over a polluted body of water, and created floating islands with cleansing plants that became a haven for nesting birds without predators [*Veden Taika (The Magic of Water)*, Halikonlahti Bird Pools, Salo, Finland 2007-9]. It's made a huge difference to their environment. It got the community involved and they all worked together and so those people can move forward with these ideas. And whether or not the artist is a mother, I think this kind of practice embraces the ethics of care that we've been talking about.

MM: I think this is coming to a head. It's those who eschew an ethics of care, like our current US administration, who are on the outside of the arguments. Because we, as a species, are slowly gleaning that if we don't adopt an ethics of care that has been so much a part of the ethics of indigenous peoples and eco feminism and the caregiving that is intrinsic to mothering, we will not survive. This is exactly the project that Natalie Loveless and Sheena Wilson are developing.

MC: In *Documenta 14* much of the work comes from these other spheres. Think of Lygia Pape, and the image of her performance piece with the children [*Divisor*, (1968) shown in Geeta Kapur's presentation, *Documenta 14*]. She changed the way she worked because of the dictatorship, creating films and performances with the community, that were then enacted on the streets of Rio. These are spheres of possibility we're talking about here and working within the community is a really important one. —In response to the question, what can you do?

MM: The protest movements all around the United States and the world, on a range of issues such as climate change, women's rights, science, health care and so on—they involve so much wit and creativity. Not only are artists really active in these movements but it's as if the current US administration has awakened the artist in everyone.

MC: And then of course you get to the question of criticality, [laughs] which always rears its ugly head. I mean how do you evaluate the quality of the work?

MM: It gives me great pleasure to experience beauty and it may be an ugly beauty or a strange beauty or conceptual beauty but it has to be beautiful. I think that's what was interesting about Lauren Bon's work *Not a Cornfield* [not in *Documenta*] or the work of Agnes Denes [*Documenta 14*] – It was beautiful to see the film of the young trees growing on the hill. It was beautiful to see that as an image and certainly I imagine it would be beautiful to encounter it.

MC: And Jackie Brookner's work communicates that same sensation. Brookner is another artist who could easily have been in this exhibition. You can incorporate the aesthetic dimension of art into a project that is also functional and nurturing. But then the whole question of beauty is so fraught: who defines it? Is beauty a superficial characteristic?

MM: Beauty, visual form, has to compel us in complex ways that are not easily pinned down. I guess that's part of the pleasure.

MC: Experiencing beauty can expand your horizons, contribute to your well-being, and for me that's one of the major functions of art, it's what drew me to it in the first place. The work that we have been discussing accomplishes this as well as incorporating the kind of beauty that, as you say, may cause discomfort, or even repulsion. I think, for example, of the video we saw about the uprising by the communist resistance in Athens during World War II [Mary Zygouri, *The Round-up Project: Kokkinia 1979–Kokkinia 2017* \ M. Z. \ M. K. (2017) Digital video, color, sound 30 min.].

MM: So the work can function in more ways than one. I think it has to, somehow, and it can be the elegance of the idea and its implementation, a formal surprise, a pleasure, something you can't take your eyes off, something that changes how you think. It's a very interesting moment for visual artists making something else: a film, a performance, a book, a poem, a piece of music, a musical event. There were lots of books in the show. I like the idea of an artist writing a novel [Chernick is writing a novel]. It's endlessly reproducible without any loss of aesthetic value; it's multiple, in that it can be hardcover or soft cover; it can be fragmented, excerpted; it can be a kindle book; the spoken word; it can be translated; it can even become the basis of other forms such as opera or film; and it has all this flexibility and accessibility and yet it's still the same object.

MC: But now that's the question: can work that addresses the maternal fulfill those multiple functions, materially, socially, politically, conceptually?

Even though I gave a lot of thought to the aesthetics and the material form of my maternal work [from the late 1980s and 1990s], the overt content and the fact that I had changed my work brought about a very hostile reaction from curators and even some artists.

MM: It's like when Philip Guston changed from abstraction to figuration in the late '60s.

MC: But also when you're dealing specifically with your own children, there's that issue of your family versus my family and whether that can open up and be interesting to someone else. Are someone else's children interesting to me? Is there a way to universalize the experience?

MM: I remember when I took my *Untitled Breast Milk Drawings* [2002-6] to my framer I was shocked by her reaction to them. I thought of the drawings as trying to depict the mother, myself, while the self is loosened, during early motherhood, a sort of contingent-self self-portrait. The drawings had fragments of the child—an eye, an ear, a hand—but drawing fragments of my new baby was a document of what *I* looked at. And if you looked closely, these body parts were also pushing up against another body: the mother, like a great ground: her belly, her nipple, her breast, me. The drawing was of neither the child nor myself, but of something in between.

MC: They are *so* beautiful. Glimpses into Bracha Ettinger's *Matrixial Border Space*. [2006]

MM: My framer referred to them, affectionately but diminutively, as 'These little cutie-pies.' Maybe that's a problem with the work, but there were all these complex questions in my head, and what my framer was seeing was fragments of a baby's body—you know, baby pictures—so even in relation to the other marks on the page, the image of the child—and especially the baby—is over-determined, and I quite directly understood why Mary [Kelly] averred her position, to not use photographs, for so long. And if the image

is of your own child, it's really difficult to separate how you feel about it from how it reads to the rest of the world as an artwork.

MC: Of course when you have an infant, you work with 'the materials at hand.' But I do think that the later years are worth examining, especially in terms of how you and your child and your family function in the culture and this whole issue of over-determination. I do like seeing artwork with older children. I mean something like Courtney [Kessel]'s piece with her daughter [*In Balance With*, 2010 to the present] could easily have fit into the exhibition [*Documenta 14*].

MM: Actually Myrel, I think your *Mommy, Mommy* [1992] could have too: It's one of the major works to meet that challenge: it is beautiful, profound and multivalent. And the body of your work addressing maternity is like a durational piece, moving from infancy to adulthood, always observing, always inquiring, always making the poetic and profound from the repetitions and changes of ordinary life. Tehching Hsieh [durational performance artist, 1978-99] has nothing on a mothering artist!

What if you had young artists who were interested in the practice of nurturance and an ethics of care, who didn't have a personal experience of motherhood?

MC: I don't think that everyone needs to make the connection between an ethics of care and mothering but there *are* women who are interested: young women I know in New York who do not have children. I remember one in particular whom I had met through the protest group I joined after Trump's election, who came to the Balancing Act panel [CAA 2017]. I said to her, 'I didn't know you had children.' And she said, 'I don't. But I might have some one day, so I was interested.'

MM: Oh that's fabulous. That's exactly the sort of person I'm thinking of.

MC: When I think of myself at that age I was so disdainful. I thought women artists who had children must not be serious.

MM: I did too. I was terrible.

MC: But that is something you absorb from the culture and it was certainly accurate because women who are mothers have to work twice as hard.

MM: And you had to work twice as hard already just being women in the art world.

MC: So if you wanted to be accepted by the male art world you'd better not demonstrate any female characteristics such as being a mother.

I had an interesting experience when I had my show at PS1. It was my first big show and it was a hot place to show then, you know, I was on my way...

MM: ... to fame and glory. What year was this?

MC: This was 1977.

MC: So there was a group of women who came to the show. A woman, in her forties at the time, and a group of her friends and I had a discussion afterwards about how hard it was to be an artist and have children. And it was even harder then, right? I remember thinking to myself: *You didn't have to have those kids, you chose to.*

MM: How old were you then?

MC: I was twenty-five. So that's also interesting in terms of how one's thought develops through one's appreciation, knowledge, the life skills that contribute to your understanding of the world.

MM: We were talking about the artist Sarah Irvin, who, while feeding her baby in a rocking chair, made drawings from the marks the rocking chair imprinted on a piece of paper, an index of her time and action that resulted in beautiful strange drawings [*Rocking Chair Series*, 2014-15]. I liked them immediately and they reminded me of

conceptual artists working in the sixties and seventies. It comes out of a language from art, like Robert Rauschenberg referring to Duchamp.

MC: And the maternal hasn't really been expressed that way before.

MM: No. And they make for really interesting comparisons with earlier generations of artists: I think of Carolee Schneemann's work where she swings through the space and makes these big marks [*Up To and Including Her Limits* 1973-76] or William Anastasi's untitled walking drawings, subway drawings, that he did from the late nineteen sixties on. And I also appreciate that the rocking chair work is moving its subject outside of a representational system –you know, the old 'pictures of babies' problem.

MC: I enjoy looking at them, I find them very beautiful. And knowing what they are contributes to the experience. They are a decisive extension of historical precedents. Her marks are different although she's working in a similar conceptual language. In addition she's putting together a data-base of artists who are mothers. She's a very interesting artist with a clear vision.

MM: The works that we see around the questions of mothering and nurturance, they are the works that engage me now. They're awkward, sometimes I don't like them, but they make me think, they challenge me, and sometimes they make me very happy. It's work that engages these very urgent questions around the Anthropocene and an ethics of care.

MC: Imagine an art world waking up to a *Documenta* 15 devoted to a feminist, maternalist, eco-feminist future.