

maternal metaphors

Maternal Metaphors

Artists/Mothers/Artwork

The Rochester Contemporary
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Curated by Myrel Chernick

“Take her away to the red-room, and lock her in there.”
Jane Eyre

To my mothers

Introduction

Myrel Chernick

It is with pleasure and satisfaction that I find myself writing the introduction to this catalogue: pleasure in the realization of a project that has been “in progress” for many years, and satisfaction that I can now move forward with a sense of accomplishment.

During the time that I first began collecting the ideas for *Maternal Metaphors*, then during years of proposing the exhibit to numerous institutions and observing the responses and rejections I received, I learned a great deal about the relationship between maternal ambivalence and both popular culture and the art world. However, as I contemplated putting *Maternal Metaphors* behind me once and for all, I received the auspicious e-mail from the Rochester Contemporary, with tentative dates for the exhibition. It is truly an appropriate time for me to see this project come to fruition. My twins, who were eleven when I first conceived of the exhibit, are now seventeen and preparing to leave home for college in the fall. My tenure as full-time primary caregiver is almost completed. In another manifestation of my ambivalence, I both celebrate and mourn their departure.

I am continually encountering young women who are grappling with the issues raised by the work in this show; it is a cycle that repeats itself, with each generation of new mothers. For these and other multiple reasons, the work remains relevant and timely, as the continuing sense of isolation and frustration felt by these women, particularly in the field of visual art, needs to be addressed and confronted.

Before I had children, I could never have anticipated the consequences that motherhood would have for my artistic life. Of course I knew that time and financial constraints would multiply, that my relationship to my studio and the art world would change. But by the time my children were thinking and talking and infusing me with the creativity of

childhood as well as exhausting me with their constant needs and demands, I knew that I wanted to address some aspects of this life in my artwork. I had to make art from this place. I hoped to validate my decision to have children, and in conveying some of the difficulties of this choice, to challenge the images of motherhood that I saw in popular culture. My first step was to read everything I could get my hands on that had the word mother in it, which, as an expansion of my ongoing reading about women, tended to comprise works of literary criticism, feminist psychoanalysis, and fiction. As I turn around and look at the shelf behind me while I’m writing this I see titles such as *Of Woman Born* (Adrienne Rich), *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Nancy Chodorow), *The Spectral Mother* (Madelon Sprengnether), *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (Marianne Hirsch), *The Unspeakable Mother*, (Deborah Kelly Kloepfer), *Mother Reader* (Moyra Davey), *The Mother Knot* (Jane Lazarre), *Beloved* (Toni Morrison), and many more. I found this reading to be invaluable when it came to formulating my new work. It also made me feel connected to the women who wrote these books.

And so my art—having evolved from formal sculpture to multimedia installation—changed again, incorporating my current maternal needs and desires. My children while still young were happy contributors and collaborators, and this enhanced the bond between us.

The resulting installations were emotionally and artistically rewarding, but when I began bringing the work into the public realm (as had been my practice in the past), I noticed some definite trends. The more explicitly involved with motherhood my work became, the more trouble I had locating venues for showing it.

The reasons for this trouble were of course diverse. I was growing older. The institutions where I had connec-

tions changed personnel and ideology; new younger curators didn't know my work, and with my limited time, caught between family, employment and artwork, I wasn't striving to remain visible. Openings and conferences were always at night or on weekends, and I barely had enough time to make the work, let alone promote myself. But there was more to it than that. I began to surmise that the subject matter was influencing these curatorial decisions. I detected certain patterns of response, certain hostilities. I felt isolated, and needed to connect with other women who were working this way. It seemed obvious to me that these artists existed, although the only work I was intensely familiar with at the time was *Post-Partum Document*, by Mary Kelly. I then decided to write a proposal for an exhibition. Not only would I be able to meet and create a dialogue with artists who had common concerns, but a group show of provocative work would demonstrate that there could be an interest in aspects of maternity for the art world.

The proposal as well as the list of artists developed gradually. Ellen McMahon, whose work I discovered through A.I.R. Gallery's website, was a major resource. Ellen had written a paper called "Maternity, Autonomy, Ambivalence and Loss," which paralleled many of my concerns and interests. She introduced me to Andrea Liss, the writer and art historian from Los Angeles who was organizing a panel for the College Art Association in 1999. Andrea put me in touch with Gail Rebhan, who invited me to present a slide show in Toronto at a conference on Mothers and Sons in 1998. There I met Judy Gelles and Marion Wilson. Ellen referred me to Monica Bock the following year, who subsequently spoke on a panel with Sarah Webb at Barnard College. I saw the work of Renée Cox, Judy Glantzman and Aura Rosenberg here in New York, and when I became familiar with Mary Kelly's lesser known maternal work, *Primapara*, longed to include that as well. And so the list grew and became coherent, in what has truly been a collaborative effort.

My decision to produce a catalogue to accompany the exhibit with limited time at my disposal has made me ever more appreciative of the world of electronic interconnection and digital imaging and printing. Although I was helped and supported by many more friends and colleagues than I have room to mention here, I would like to thank Elizabeth McDade who accepted the proposal; my parents who so generously provided funds for the catalogue; the writers who eagerly embraced my suggestion to contribute their essays at such short notice, and whose work met all my expectations and more; the artists who worked with me, for their commiseration, shared anecdotes, and their beautiful, uncompromising, and provocative work. I would particularly like to acknowledge Ellen McMahon, who has been with me since the beginning; Monica Bock, who presented with me in New York and Toronto; and Sarah Webb, who first submitted the proposal to RoCo, and has been working assiduously and skillfully in multiple capacities to make this happen. Finally, thanks to Don, who has always encouraged me to follow my dreams, and Sam and Tanya, who, in introducing me to maternal ambivalence, made it all possible.



MYREL CHERNICK, *The Women in His Life*, 1998, detail

Maternal Metaphors

Jennie Klein



Coatlicue/Coatlique (She of the Serpent Skirt) Aztec, from Tenochtitlán, Mexico City, ca. 1487-1520. Andesite, approximately 8 ft. 6 in. high. National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City

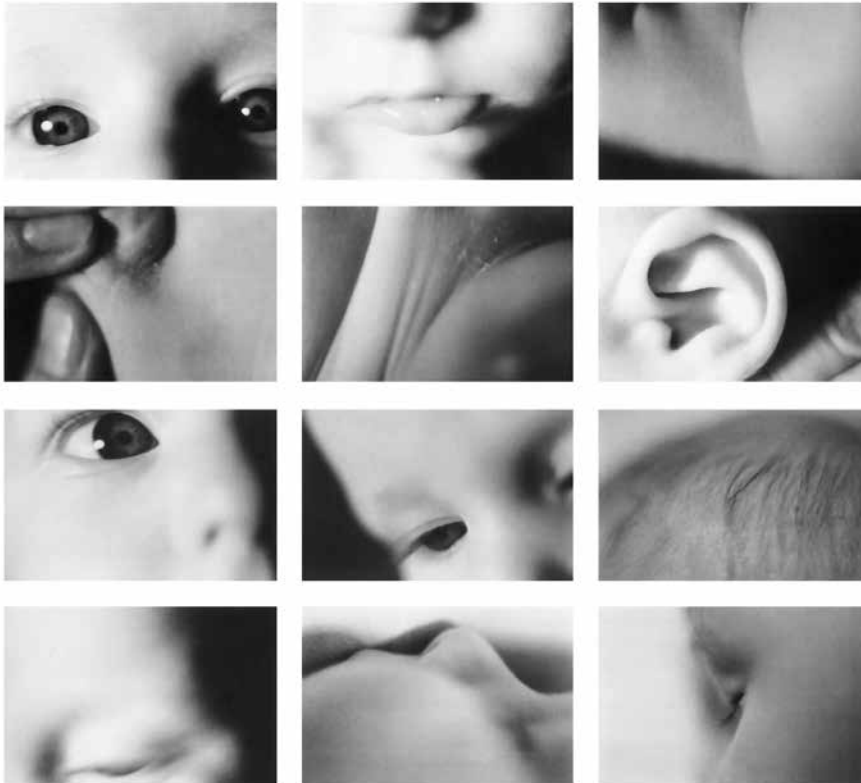
Recently, while doing research for a project other than this catalogue essay, I came across an image of a young woman dressed as Coatlicue, the mother of the Aztec deity Huitzilpochtli. A video production still from *Our Lady of L.A.*, produced and conceived by Cheri Gaulke, Kathleen Forest, and Sue Maberry, the image of Coatlicue was adapted from the formidable eight-foot high statue presently located in Mexico City.¹ As I compared the two images, I was struck by the difference between the two, a difference that I felt illustrated rather nicely the issues around motherhood, ideology and representation that *Maternal Metaphors* has hoped to raise. The horrific Mexico City Coatlicue, truly the classic, pre-symbolic mother of psychoanalytic theory, has no head. Huitzilpochtli, when threatened by his jealous brothers and sisters, emerged from the top of his mother's head, destroying it in the process. Thus, the Mexico City Coatlicue has a "head" made up of two snakes that face each other. Representative of the blood associated with sacrifice, menstruation, and childbirth, the snake appears again as her woven skirt and as a hideous flow of menstrual blood that dangles like a flaccid penis between her legs. The *Coatlicue from Our Lady of L.A.* by the group of young women artists who had not yet had children but did have a firm belief in the power of the goddess, is cleaned up with one head, a woven skirt and no menstrual blood/afterbirth. The Coatlicue of *Our Lady of L.A.*, despite being made by a group of young, alternative, feminist artists associated with the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, is more typical of how mothers, and motherhood have been depicted in the history of Western art. Sanitized, her head restored, she becomes one of many abstract symbols of a goddess, safely removed from the dangerous realm of childbirth and child-rearing.² Although Mothers, from the *Venus of Willendorf* to Mary Cassatt's images or Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Madonna*, have always been represented in Western art, until recently they

have rarely been its creators. As the philosopher Sara Ruddick has pointed out, “feminist thinking was of limited use in forging a representation of mothers as thinkers. ...feminists tended to speak as daughters trying to forge a daughter/self-respecting connection to their mother’s lives.”³

The artists included in *Maternal Metaphors*, almost all of them mothers, are trying to articulate what Ruddick termed a “maternal perspective.” They are making work that addresses the ongoing issue of what it means to be an artist and a mother in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. For many of these artists, the starting point has been a feminist reading of psychoanalytic theory regarding the position of the mother vis-à-vis her (usually male) child. Although psychoanalytic theory is more concerned with the development of the child rather than the subjectivity of the mother (even Nancy Chodorow’s groundbreaking *The Reproduction of Mothering* dealt primarily with the psycho-social development of the girl child, rather than that of the mother), it is nevertheless a starting point that is not obfuscated by the hoary ideology of the mother as either self-sacrificing and self-abnegating victim, or the monstrous agent of rage and repression.⁴ One of the first artists to engage productively with the discourse of Lacanian psychoanalysis and motherhood was Mary Kelly, whose *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979) sought to explore the discourse through which both the child’s and the mother’s subjectivity were constituted. Following the anti-scopophilic logic first articulated by Laura Mulvey in her seminal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (published in the British magazine *Screen* in 1976), Kelly attempted to thwart the fetishized relationship of the mother/(male) baby dyad by exploring how this relationship actually develops through a meticulous documentation of the first four years of her son’s life. *Post-Partum Document*, with 135 pieces, is a dense and theoretically rigorous work that includes everything from fecal stained diapers, accompanied by a detailed account of what the baby had been fed that day, to meditations on the mother/child relationship accompanied by castings of her son’s right hand. An exploration of the pleasure of maternal femininity and a clinical examination

of that pleasure, *Post-Partum Document* both makes literal the Lacanian articulation of the constitution of the male subject and, for the first time, the manner in which the mother’s subjectivity is also formed and re-constituted through the process of becoming a mother. Significantly, this process is just that, rather than an instantaneous transformation that occurs at the moment of childbirth.

Included in this exhibition is Kelly’s *Primapara*, a series of photographs from 1973/1997 that document the first bath and manicure of her son. Interestingly enough, these photographs, often characterized as an offshoot of *Post-Partum Document*, initially preceeded that work. In an interview with Juli Carson, Kelly noted, “Most of my work, including the *Post-Partum Document*, began with photographic studies.”⁵ Deciding, as she put it, to move away from the “icon to the index,” Kelly kept *Primapara* separate from *Post-Partum Document*, returning to the images again in 1997. Given Kelly’s close association with British feminism in the late seventies and early eighties, it would be logical to assume that her work would be anti-visual in an attempt to thwart culturally determined scopophilia. In fact, this is not the case. As Kelly herself wrote, “the image, as it is organized in that space called the picture, can refer to a heterogeneous system of signs—indexical, symbolic and iconic. And thus, that it is possible to invoke the non-specular, the sensory, the somatic, in the visual field; to invoke, especially, the register of the invocatory drives...through ‘writing.’”⁶ The images of the baby’s face and head in *Primapara* stand in stark contrast to the more traditional images of children that grace the covers of parenting magazines. Cropped, difficult to make out, along with a text that is not linked indexically to the images, they thwart fetishistic closure and suggest the sort of interruption of the scopic field for which Kelly has called in her critical writings. The close-up, cropped images of the baby’s face are uncanny—in the sense that they are both strange and yet terribly familiar—just as the images of the manicure, with the tiny fingers placed in nerve-wracking proximity to an ordinary nail clipper, are both familiar and disturbing. Many mothers, myself included,



MARY KELLY
Primapara, 1974
Bathing series, 12 units
Gelatin silver print,
10.5 in. X 8.5 in.



MARY KELLY, *Post-Partum Document*, 1978
resin and slate, 25.4 cm X 20.3 cm



GAIL REBHAN
Baby, 1988
 Gelatin silver print, 16 in. X 20 in.

have fetishistically devoured every aspect of their baby's tiny bodies with their eyes and fingers—particularly resonant, for me, is the image from *Primapara* in which Kelly's thumb and index finger are visible as she lifts her baby's earlobe in order to wash underneath. Most of us who have had very small children have in fact experienced the same series of images that Kelly has presented in *Primapara*. It seems to me, then, that part of the reason for the continued “uncanniness” of these images is that they show not the child, but the mother's experience of the child. They document the mother becoming mother, rather than the baby as an entity already separated from the mother. One of the strengths of both *Primapara* and *Post-Partum Document* is that they engage in a dialogue with Lacanian theory, rather than simply illustrating it. At the same time, there is a certain amount of clinical detachment that is almost reminiscent of medical photographs. In looking at the photographs of *Primapara*, I cannot help but contrast them with those of Gail Rebhan, shot several years later in 1986. For this series, appropriately titled *Babies*, Rebhan used a 20 X 24 Polaroid format in order to explore, in exquisite detail, the unique facial features of very young children. Rebhan's *Babies* are overwhelming. Larger than life, often crying with tears and mucous mixing freely, they are at once both horrible and adorable. “I also stimulate in the viewer two emotions that many parents have when holding their young child. One is the feeling of being overwhelmed and overpowered completely by a baby...the other is to inspect the child's face in great detail.”⁷ Rebhan's photographs of babies permit no distance between viewer and viewed. To look at these oversized, often crying faces is to lose oneself in an ocean of need. There is no detachment here—the mother/ viewer has become the essential but silent Other—the pre-symbolic field from which the newborn will slowly begin to wrest his or her identity. Although both artists have used close-up images of baby faces in their respective series, there is a fundamental difference in approach. Rebhan uses humor and parody to exaggerate the significance of the baby vis-à-vis his or her parents. Kelly, on the other hand, is in essence conducting a clinical experiment—using her own psy-

che as grounds for an exploration of what it means to become (or be interpellated as) a mother.

Kelly is as well known for her critical writing as she is for her art,⁸ where she is careful to maintain the same critical distance that she maintains in her visual work. Ellen McMahon, by contrast, has eschewed that critical distance in her writings about motherhood published on her web site (www.ellenmcmahon.com). In “A Little Bit of Loss” written between 1996-2000, McMahon is brutally honest about her struggles to be a good mother to her daughters Alice and Della. Written like a diary or a daily journal, “A Little Bit of Loss” chronicles McMahon's inability to wean either of her children from breastfeeding, get them to sleep in their own beds at night, control Della's temper tantrums (McMahon resorts to giving herself a “time-out” in a bathroom that has a broken lock), or get ten year-old Alice to not wear high heeled shoes to a family gathering. McMahon has clearly struggled to be a good mother with no particular guidance (at one point she mentions feeling alienated from her own mother). She has thus created several sets of flash cards, like the ones that children use to learn how to read, in order to acclimatize mothers to their new role as caretakers of infants. *Baby Talk Flashcards* (1998) is a boxed set of twelve 6 in. X 4 in. cards that feature an object, the baby word for that object, and the English translation on the other side. All words, the description guarantees, were actually spoken by a real baby. *Pre-Verbal Flash Cards* (1998) is a set of eight cards with images of medical objects used to care for a very young baby, such as a suction device and a medicine dispenser. With tongue in cheek, McMahon writes that these flash cards are designed to return the adult who is weary of the demands of rationality to the pre-speaking world. All of these objects cause both pain (more for the mother than the child) and healing (which brings relief to both of them). Along these same lines, McMahon's *Suckled Series* (2000), an exquisite series of drawings based on a bottle nipple, manages to suggest both comfort and complete dependence—breast and bottle are extremely soothing to children, who must nevertheless be eventually weaned from

them. McMahon's nipple is twisted and deformed—rather like her own probably were after nursing two children for a total of six years. More to the point, the *Suckled Series* is emblematic of what happens to mothers after many years of mothering—they are pulled completely out of shape.

McMahon's flash cards seem to have been designed for the mother of Gail Rebhan's overwhelming baby. Like Kelly, McMahon, albeit in a more lighthearted and humorous manner, deals with the mother's retreat from and the child's entry into the symbolic. The baby develops words as the mother loses her own. Unable to process adult conversation anymore, the mother can find solace in McMahon's flash cards. Unlike Kelly, who avoids producing objects that could be fetishized, McMahon deliberately makes fetishistic objects. Trained as a medical illustrator and graphic designer, McMahon is very familiar with the codes of consumer desire. Her flash cards, which mimic the visually arresting flash cards designed for children, appeal to the inner child in the audience of adult mothers she addresses. McMahon's flashcards and *Suckled Series*, like the work of Mary Kelly, are very much grounded in postmodern discourses about language and representation. With the luxury of working approximately fifteen years after Kelly began *Post-Partum Document*, McMahon is able to reintroduce some of the sensuousness (and pseudo central core imagery) of the art from the seventies feminist movement in the United States without the worry of being accused of essentialism or lack of intellectual rigor. Working in Britain in the early seventies, Kelly felt compelled to repudiate what she perceived as the errors of the early feminist movement. *Primapara* was created at the same time that feminist artists in America were mystifying birth and motherhood through an invocation of feminist spirituality and a/the goddess. More dependent on consciousness-raising than psychoanalysis and firmly entrenched in masculinist avant-garde notions of the primacy of painting and drawing, many of these women constructed object-based representations of motherhood in quasi-mythological/mystical terms, exemplified by Judy Chicago's *Birth Project* (1980-85), a series of textile (embroidered,

needlepoint, woven, etc.) panels made from drawings and paintings done by Chicago (who is not a mother). The titles of these pieces—*The Creation*, *Birth Tear*, etc.—suggest the connection that Chicago sought to establish between the act of giving birth and a feminist cosmology. Widely criticized for their supposed essentialism⁹, they have obscured object-based work that attempts to deal with the complexities of motherhood as a lived condition that is constantly evolving. Judy Glantzman's decision to attempt to articulate motherhood in paint is one that strikes me as being especially courageous, particularly given the rather strident essentialist/anti-essentialist discourse of the past few years. Designated a Neo-Expressionist by critics such as Holland Cotter in the mid-eighties, Glantzman made a name for herself showing figurative work (in some cases, plywood "cut-outs" of people) painted with enamel deck paint on bits of street rubbish that she had found in NYC.¹⁰ Part graffiti and part expressionist, Glantzman's heavily manipulated canvases are richly textured and dense. In reviews of her work, Glantzman is often compared to the expressionists, mainly women artists such as Paula Modersohn-Becker. In some ways the comparison is apt. Like Modersohn-Becker, whose powerful primitive visions of Ur-motherhood continue to resonate today, Glantzman has made densely textured images of infant heads and mothers' arms that are also evocative of the work of Kathe Kollwitz and Edvard Munch. Glantzman's process is intuitive:

I begin to see imagery—like a face or a hand—and I try to use line to articulate that form. The result is a pile up of mostly heads, and some hands. These are disembodied figures that cluster together to make larger formations. They seem like spirits, or a visual rambling, a cast of characters inside my head.¹¹

Glantzman's intuitive, modernist process of image-making is completely opposite to Kelly's detached, clinical approach. When viewing Glantzman's paintings, the parallels between *l'écriture féminine*¹² and her obsessive mark-making are striking. Glantzman believes that her cast of characters reflects the relationship that she has with her daughter. Her paint-



ELLEN McMAHON, *Suckled II*, 1996-present
Charcoal on Rives BFK, 20 in. X 13 in.



JUDY GLANTZMAN
Untitled, 2003
Oil paint on canvas,
80 in. X 70 in.



AURA ROSENBERG
Mary Heilmann/Eve and Carmen, 1997
C-print, 40 in. X 30 in.

ings, however, are less about the specific aspects of that relationship than they are about how a mother might write/represent motherhood through the agency of writing/mark-making. Glantzman's process is not direct: she begins by making intuitive decisions about line and color that resolve themselves into faces and arms (especially faces in the case of her more recent work). Space is ambiguous and elastic; the faces emerge from the background as though still connected. Glantzman's decision to use an expressionist vocabulary is significant. The loose, tortured brushwork, ambiguous space and autobiographical lines of expressionist painting have come to serve as the sign of the tortured male artist. Very few of these painters have been women; even fewer have been mothers.¹³ As Susan Rubin Suleiman remarked in 1979, "Mothers don't write, they are written. Simply expressed, this is the underlying assumption of most psychoanalytic theories about writing and artistic creation in general."¹⁴ The tortured male avant-garde writer or painter—ubiquitous in the expressionist canon—attempts to re-write the body of the mother, the "essential but silent Other." Of course, Suleiman noted, mothers do write, and that process can be categorized into two broad themes: those mothers who view motherhood as an obstacle and those who view it as a "source of connection to work and world." For Glantzman, at least, it is the latter category that drives her to make images—a reflection of the "blurred boundaries and complex feelings of joy and intrusion" that characterizes being a mother. The dense and ambiguous space of Glantzman's recent work, all of which is untitled, seems to me to be a literalization of the chora, the psychic space theorized by Julia Kristeva in which the mother and child co-exist prior to the child's entry into the symbolic. There is a connectedness between mother and child (more apparent in the two paintings with only two figures) that is redolent of a psychic, ropery mucous—the kind of mucous that is associated with childbirth and pregnancy.

In the same essay quoted above, Suleiman suggested, "motherhood, which establishes a natural link (the child) between woman and the social world, provides a privileged means of entry into the order of culture and language."¹⁵ Aura

Rosenberg has made this statement literal by using her child (and the children of friends/colleagues) as a link between her own practice and that of other—often male—artists of the avant-garde. Working in collaboration with well-known artists such as Mike Kelley, Laurie Simmons, Mary Heilmann, Jim Shaw, and Kiki Smith, Rosenberg has them paint a child's face and then photographs that child in a format reminiscent of commercial photographs and mug shots. Associated today with birthday parties, fairs, and rainy days at suburban malls, face painting is the benign solution for a middle-class clientele that doesn't want anything more permanent on the faces of their children. In fact, *Who Am I, what am I, where am I?* was developed from the photo portraits that Rosenberg made as a benefit for the Winter Fair at her daughter's elementary school. One of the most popular activities at the fair was face painting, and Rosenberg obligingly made portraits for the parents of her daughter's school friends. As she made these portraits, Rosenberg was struck by the effort to balance disguise and authenticity—to play with the idea of the masquerade, which children absolutely love. And yet, as Rosenberg herself asks, "Painting a child's face can be beautiful, but who in the end takes it seriously? It can seem as debased as black velvet painting."¹⁶ Rosenberg gives an avant-garde cachet to face painting while simultaneously permitting the children who are being painted to engage in the sort of identity play that is so compelling to them and to us. What has emerged, however, is hardly your ordinary painted face. In the hands of Rosenberg and her invited artists, the painted faces of the children can become uncanny and frightening: Caucasian "primitives" whose atavistic visages stare menacingly out at the camera. *Jim Shaw/Joe Sienna* (1995) depicts a child that has become a hungry maw with not one but two mouths of gaping teeth. The first, full of sharp, shark-like teeth, covers Joe's entire face. Echoing the larger mouth is Joe's actual mouth, snarling for the photograph and full of emerging teeth. Rosenberg's own child Carmen, in *Mike Kelley/Carmen* looks like a refugee from a Goth camp, part supplicant Mary Magdalene and part heroin addict, with her black lipstick, pasty white face makeup and black-lined

eyes. At other times, the face painting collaboration has yielded charming results. In *Laurie Simmons/Lena*, Lena is made up to look like a cat puppet with the aid of sock ears, a bow tie, and some sort of band that makes her mouth appear jointed to her body. In *Kiki Smith/Carmen*, Carmen's attractive young face is covered with delicate line drawings of flowers, butterflies, tear drops (all things that young girls are taught to love) as well as words such as "nectar" and "sojourn." The effect is oddly beautiful, particularly since the image is so unconventional.

I first encountered Rosenberg's work in an exhibition about childhood and childhood subjectivity entitled *Presumed Innocence* (Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, Spring 1998), premised upon the notion that the psychic lives of children are not as innocent and saccharine as popular culture would have us believe. Rosenberg, whose most recent project (2002) is a photo/text presentation of a Berlin childhood (*Berliner Kindheit*, based on a book of the same title by Walter Benjamin), is deeply concerned with the psychic construction of childhood and is not afraid to acknowledge that it is not always as innocent as we want it to be. In her article "Playing and Motherhood; or How to get the Most Out of the Avant-Garde," first published in 1990, Suleiman argues "playful inventions of avant-garde writing, starting with surrealism and continuing to present work, can provide an impetus, perhaps even a metaphor or model, for re-imagining the mother in her social and child-rearing role. This re-imagining takes the form of a displacement, from what I call the patriarchal mother to the playful mother."¹⁷ The mother that Suleiman imagines is a laughing mother who "plays" with her notion of self and self-boundaries. Noting that humor, in the Freudian sense, is both pleasure-producing and rebellious, Suleiman suggests that mother's play provides a means by which change in the patriarchal regime of "sadistic, narcissistic, angst-ridden" child/male artists might be challenged. What often goes unremarked in reviews and articles about Rosenberg's work is that in setting up a three-way collaboration between herself, the child, and a well-known artist, she undercuts the masculinist construction of avant-garde subjectivity in which the alienated and

often male artist works in solitude to produce "great" works of art. The artists who participated in the *Who am I?* series are constrained by medium, support, and desire of the model who must "wear" whatever they produce. Rosenberg meanwhile has only partial control over the final outcome of the "work"—she has become one of three collaborators, rather than the sole auteur. Avant-garde play comes at the expense of avant-garde angst. It is hardly surprising and quite appropriate that several of the art world's most notorious "bad boys" including Mike Kelley and John Baldessari, show up as collaborators.

As a mother of two children slightly younger than Carmen was when she participated in the *Who Am I?* series, I am struck by Rosenberg's ability to incorporate her child into her art in a manner that was fun for the child. Reviewers of Rosenberg's work have often not seen it that way. One of them, Robert Mahoney, actually went so far as to criticize Rosenberg's mothering skills: "What mother would let Mike Kelley anywhere near her daughter?"¹⁸ Many of the artists included in this exhibition, while not attacked in print for their mothering skills, have agonized over the time that art has taken away from their children.¹⁹ Monica Bock has been making work about her children since her daughter Thea was born in 1993. Shortly after the birth of her son Tristan, Bock decided to leave her native Chicago to take a tenure-track position at the University of Connecticut. "Early in my tenure process," Bock writes, "and with the example of other mothering artists in academia, I realized that my family life would not be recognized as pertinent to my work. So it became imperative to make art with and about my children, in order to make our reality known, but also to stay close to them even though half the time it's the work that preempts my actually being with them."²⁰ In *Maternal Exposure (or don't forget the lunches)* (1999-2000) Bock created a gallery-sized installation of embossed and folded sheet lead and cast glycerin bags. Inspired by the anxiety produced from exposing one's children and nurturing skills to public scrutiny, the sacks contain the daily menus that Bock prepared for her children to take to school and day camp over the course of approximately one year.²¹

For this exhibition Bock has recreated her installation *Tooth for a Tooth* (2001). Silver casts taken from then eight-year-old Thea's mouth as she lost her baby teeth are displayed on shelf-like pedestals as though they were the precious relics of a saint. *Tooth for a Tooth* is the three dimensional realization of *Tooth No. 1-4*, a series of four photographs that document Thea losing a front tooth (complete with bloody drool). While *Tooth No. 1-4* is somewhat disturbing, given the apparent violence with which the tooth is removed from the mouth, it is nowhere near as grotesque as the cast teeth. In *Tooth No. 1-4*, the inclusion of the bottom portion of Thea's face gives the teeth an indexical context that precludes reading them as abject. Children's teeth fall out, and the mouth, jaw, and lips containing those teeth are obviously those of a child. *Tooth for a Tooth*, on the other hand, has no such context. Seemingly precious, because they are silver and placed on a pedestal, these castings of a very normal moment of childhood development (it is only those with something wrong with them whose mouths don't look like that of Thea prior to puberty) become free floating signifiers of both motherly obsession and eugenic unfit, reminiscent of the photographs taken of deformed heads, mouths and bones from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the review of Rosenberg's work shows, it is all too easy to point fingers at supposedly unfit mothers. Bock's choices—home birth, career, limited vaccinations, suspect nutritional decisions—can be read as either a very good mother or a very bad mother. It is not by accident that at least one version (there are several) of *Maternal Exposure* included on the wall the text of a poem by Zofia Burr, which began

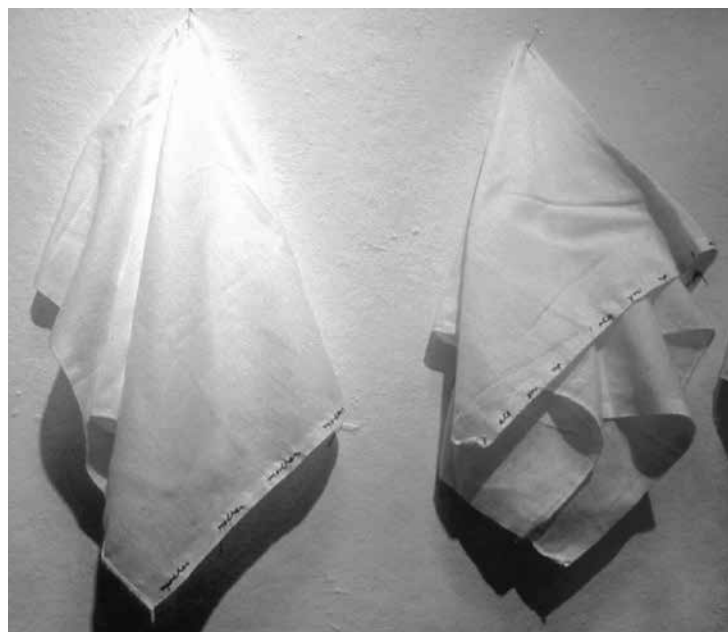
This is for the bad mother in me I love
 Wanting to be kept. For
 the Bad mother I love—wanting²²

Bock has continued to work with teeth as repositories of memory and signifiers (literally) of loss. In *Sunday News (Mother)* (2001), Bock has displayed a row of miniature lead frames containing an Holocaust image of a young child rising up from his dead mother's arms that was published in the Sunday morning paper. Below these haunting images is a row of sculpted and



MONICA BOCK

Maternal Exposure (or don't forget the lunches), 1999-2000
 Glycerin and lead bags, detail



SARAH WEBB, *milk and tears*, 2001
 Birdseye weave cloth diapers, thread; detail

cast teeth embedded into the wall. At the end of this row is a real, gold-capped tooth. Reminiscent of the gold teeth taken from Holocaust victims, the tooth is in fact an indexical link to maternal sacrifice as it comes from Bock's mother. The companion piece to *Sunday News (Mother)* is *Sunday News (Daughter)* (2001) a single lead frame with the Holocaust image flanked by six of Thea's baby teeth. Bock suggests in these pieces that to be a mother is to always experience loss, even while desiring the increasing autonomy of one's child.

Like Bock, Sarah Webb has also created installations of ephemeral and delicate objects such as eggshells, doll clothes, and wax covered flowers that take up the themes of memory and loss. In *milk and tears* (2001) Webb has embroidered the text of a poem by Ann Sexton along the edge of twenty-eight birdseye weave cloth diapers that run for thirty feet.

Mother,
I ate you up.
All my need took
you down like a meal.

In the history of western art, women's breasts have been symbols of male desire and female sexuality. Confronted by the need to breast-feed her young son and come to terms with her mother-in-law's battle with breast cancer, Webb was struck by the way in which breasts could be both the source of nurture and the symbol of disease: "As bodily fluids, milk and tears are metaphors of both a mother's inexhaustible love, but also to the pain to which she yields. Leaking, dripping, milk and tears stain our skin, our clothing, and our lives in between the cycle of birth and death."²³ The diapers in *milk and tears* hang from the wall like the deflated breasts or belly of a mother who has breastfed her children. Children literally "eat" up their mothers—first stretching their taut, pre-pregnancy bellies and breasts out of shape and then leaving both looking like a deflated balloon. Webb's choice of cloth diapers, disposable objects, and blood red embroidery—long associated with women's work—makes this installation especially poignant. It is what Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith have characterized as an enactment of cultural memory: "the product of fragmen-

tary personal and collective experiences articulated through technologies and media that shape even as they transmit memory."²⁴ In *milk and tears* Webb represents the debased objects of child rearing and women's work in order to retell the story of motherhood from the perspective of a feminist, artist, mother, and grieving daughter-in-law.

Many of the artists included in *Maternal Metaphors* have used their own histories in order to re-write and envision a collective cultural memory that is anti-hegemonic, feminist, and maternal. Judy Glantzman's most recent paintings, full of the heads of children with different racial and ethnic characteristics, serve as a kind of counter narrative to *The Family of Man* ideology which posits that we are all the same—i.e., we all want to be middle class Caucasian Americans. Glantzman's figures almost seem to swim in a sea of amniotic fluid—all different, yet connected by the maternal chora. Ellen McMahon also created a work that tied together her past with her present in a productive use of nostalgia that does not reinforce the status quo. *Love Objects* (2000) is a series of forty pencil drawings on index cards found in her mother's attic that were made the year McMahon was born. The objects chosen came from around the house and included the snout of a rubber bug that her daughter named "Stinky." Playing on our desire for the lost innocence of childhood, *Love Objects* makes history—and art—out of garbage, transforming these small unremarkable objects into repositories of cultural memory that begins with the mother, or at least the mother's attic. These unremarkable objects, viewed together, form a narrative of McMahon's journey through her mother's attic and then her house, a journey that included her daughters. As their title suggests, *Love Objects* are psychic family photographs—images that speak to the subjectivity of McMahon, her mother and her daughters. In another piece, *Alice's Idea* (2002), a folio containing a shaped text and a silver gelatin print of a young girl with writing all over her body, McMahon tells the strange and wonderful story of how her daughter Alice, fifteen at the time and on a family vacation, asked her for help with her own performance art piece. Retreating to an upstairs bedroom, McMahon helped

Alice write parts of her journal onto her body and then photographed her while Alice directed. At one point, she looked in the mirror, saw herself and Alice reflected back, and took the shot that is included in the piece.²⁵

Alice's Idea, although not typical, belongs to the genre of the family photograph, a repository of cultural memory that in spite of its conventions and codes is nevertheless most meaningful within the family's own narrative. *Alice's Idea* is not a typical family portrait—rarely are children photographed with writing all over their bodies—hence the need for a narrative explanation. Both Judy Gelles and Gail Rebhan have also used the genre of family portrait in their work in order to counter the hegemonic narratives and dominant myths of the nuclear family implied by most family photographs.

Judy Gelles' *Family Portraits* (1977-1982) are wonderfully candid images of her family life when her two sons (now both grown up and employed in NYC and Los Angeles) were very small. *Family Portraits* started when David, Gelles' second son, was three months old. Wanting to take the perfect "Gerber" baby picture, Gelles enrolled in a photography class at a local university. She soon gave up the idea of producing that perfect portrait and instead decided to record the mundane events and occurrences that come with the limitations of raising two small children. Most of the images in *Family Portraits* are both funny and poignant. My personal favorite is *Living Room* (1979), in which the detritus of children's toys, a wave of clutter that cannot be contained, has overrun an obviously middle-class home. In another image, *Self Portrait Watching TV* (1979), Gelles writes below that "on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday afternoon Jason is at nursery school and David naps and I have one and a half hours of free time to be creative and do important things."

With the invention of "Kodak" (based in Rochester, where this exhibition is taking place), the photograph has become the family's means of self-expression. Bound by conventions of class and ethnic affiliations, the typical family photograph reinforces conventional gender roles and social expectations of the people being photographed. In many

ways Gelles, who chronicles her life in the artist's book *When We Were Ten: A Photo Text Story of a Mother and Her Son*, has lived the typical middle-class existence promoted by the media. College educated, she married a professional man who worked while she stayed home with the children and "dabbled" in photography. It was only after her children were no longer toddlers that her career as a photographer began in earnest. As she put it in the introduction to *When We Were Ten*, "although the text recounts personal events, it is interesting to observe how many of these are shared by countless others. What began as a personal recording has turned into a social document."²⁶ Like Gelles, Gail Rebhan has also used the convention of the family photograph to deconstruct the fiction of the seamless middle-class life. Unlike Gelles' *Family Portraits*, which are often shockingly candid (in *Bathroom Portrait*, she sits on the toilet and remarks that she would love to be able to go to the bathroom by herself), Rebhan's "portraits" are manipulated images that combine text, found images, and photographs taken by Rebhan. Her critique of family life is also very funny and in many cases even more pointed than Gelles'.

In *M.R.I.* (2003) a text, highlighted against an image taken from Rebhan's *M.R.I.*, narrates a blissful experience of relaxation and repose: "I feel calm. I am inside a tunnel, flat on my back, not moving for 45 or 55 minutes... The M.R.I. is great. I feel rejuvenated. Why don't I just lie on the floor at home and space out? The next day I try. The phone rings, my kid comes over to talk. It just doesn't work." In *Jackson – Age 15* (2003) Rebhan made "portraits" of her son by assembling found objects—a dirty sock, CDs, candy wrappers, and coke cans—and photographing these objects. In *Family Shield* (2003), Rebhan assembles images of her family and archival family photographs of the Kachor family (spelled several different ways) next to a large menorah/family tree. These images, especially those that include archival black and white photographs from the turn of the century, are a powerful and intimate invocation of the history of one Jewish family. They also seem to reassert an identity onto Rebhan's extremely secular sons, whose Jewish identities are in danger of being

washed away in a stream of Coke, if we are to believe Rebhan's narration in her artist's book *Mother-Son Talk*. Next to an image of a plastic Santa Claus and 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... 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.²⁷

Rebhan and Gelles are both at great pains to articulate their Jewish identity in their work, although it seems to be somewhat of an uphill battle. In *When We Were Ten*, Gelles recalls,

I had been the only Jewish student in the high school. In my ninth grade history class, when asked by the teacher to describe the Jewish race, Russell D. raised his hand and said Jews have big noses, big lips, and dark curly hair. I was too scared to confront him. The teacher never said a word.²⁸

In *Diversity* (2000), a picture of her son's soccer team, Rebhan writes:

...I overhear two mothers talking about how much they enjoy living in this neighborhood. They especially like the diversity... I realize they are talking about my son and me.

As suggested by the stories above, to be Jewish is to be still considered not quite white. In spite of their commonalities with their white, middle-class neighbors, Rebhan and Gelles are still considered different. Gelles' story, in particular, 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.²⁹ 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, fortunately did not result 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, often Jewish and Irish immigrants who crowded the cities and eventually people of races that were other than Caucasian, particularly African-American. Although the science of Eugenics has been largely discredited, its specter still looms large over contemporary notions of motherhood and child rearing, 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 (although now they do it unknowingly). "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."³⁰ The boogey woman (Really Bad Mother) always lurks behind the scenes, waiting to jump out and sabotage the Really Good Mother. Some of the fascination with, and discursive structures around, two spectacularly bad mothers—Andrea Yates and Susan Smith—has to do with the fact that they were apparently really good mothers at first. Generally though, the territory of bad mother, and blighted child, is more nebulous. It is this territory that Marion Wilson explores with her bronze cast sculptures of babies, made from a mold of an anatomically correct male doll. Although the features of this doll were Caucasian, Wilson introduces several disturbing elements, including racial indeterminacy (thought by eugenicists to be an outward manifestation of degeneracy), cross-dressing, and disturbingly prescient behavior such as holding guns and running upright. *Blushing Yaksha* (2002) is based upon a Hindu (and sometimes Buddhist) Indian nature deity who is closely associated with fertility and abundance. Clad in a marvelous hat that resembles the roof of a Hindu temple, *Blushing Yaksha* has emerged from beneath the foot of Siva Nataraja (where he ordinarily gazes adoringly



Oct 5, 1977

We were up all night again. David had an ear infection, and Jason kept waking up complaining that his foot hurt. It's been 3 1/2 years now since we've had a full night's sleep without interruptions.

MARION WILSON

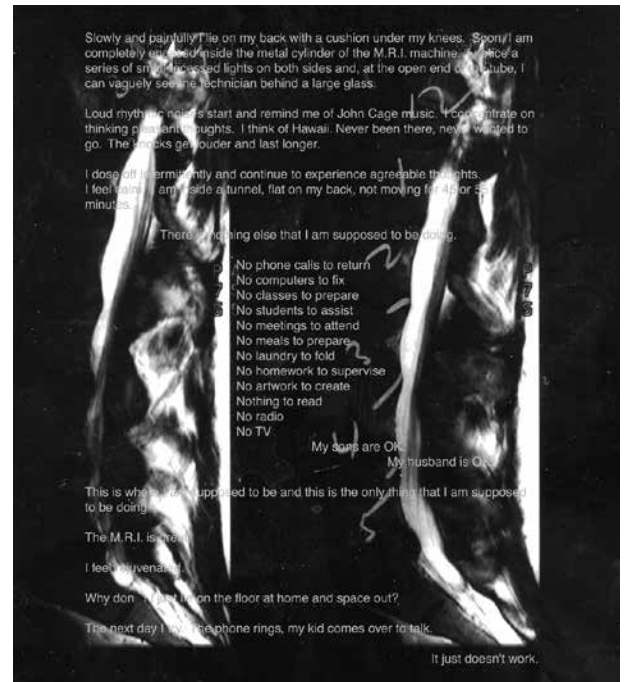
Guns for Newborns, 1998

Bronze, cast water guns

5 in. X 24 in. X 4 in.



JUDY GELLES, *Bedroom Portrait*, 1977,
Black and white Iris print, 16 in. X 20 in.
Printed in 2004



GAIL REBHAN

M.R.I., 2003

Ink jet print, 25 in. X 23 in.

up at the deity) and seems to be running amok. *The Grand Thaumaturge* (someone who is able to heal with his touch) and *The Artificer's Twin* (2002) are the younger brothers of the armor-clad babies from her 1999 installation *Playing War*. Cross-dressed in fringe and what appear to be chenille coats, these small figures are creepy children/babies who have been left unsupervised. Almost feral, they run around with strangely blank faces and inappropriate clothing. In *Guns for Newborns*, Wilson has presented the viewer with a row of six small guns. Cast in bronze from a mold made from a water gun, these little artifacts are much more lethal looking than their plastic counterparts. A commentary on both the insanity of children playing with guns (little boys are enculturated to play with guns) and the definition of what constitutes a good mother (Andrea Yates never let her children play with guns), these relics of childhood play are a mute testimony to the violence that lurks in even the sunniest portions of suburbia.

A child such as those depicted in Marion Wilson's installation grows up to be an Aileen Wuornos—a sad, lost child who became a sad, lost adult with a murderous habit. The mothers of these children are often marginalized, as they are precisely the kind of people the eugenicists sought to prevent from breeding. In the United States, these lower-class bad mothers are often presented in the popular media as being predominantly Latina or African-American rather than Jewish or Irish, as they were in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The close association in the media of women of color with practices of unfit parenting contributes to the impact of the oversized images from Renée Cox's *Yo Mama* series. The original *Yo Mama* (1993) showed Cox, nude but for high heels, holding her male toddler out in front of her while staring defiantly at the camera. Cox is the Phallic mother, powerful and muscular with small breasts and visible biceps. Struck by the power of this image, Andrea Liss has suggested that, "Cox issues a call and response back to the small, jewel-like mammy and child daguerreotype portraits. Her contemporary portrait explodes the myth of domestic bliss embedded

in the mismatched nineteenth century "family" portraits and bestows black mothers with renewed value and respect."³¹ In consumer culture, the naked bodies of black and Latina women are visible signifiers of sexual fecundity, availability, and in some cases excessive fertility. Dark skin is usually an indexical marker for lower class origins as well. I would also argue that *Yo Mama*, along with *Yo Mama At Home* (1993) and *Yo Mama The Sequel* (1995), both of which are included in *Maternal Metaphors*, have as much if not more to do with images of pregnancy in contemporary culture than they do with the "mammy" daguerreotypes of the Antebellum period.

Renée Cox's images of herself while pregnant can be read against photographs such as Bruce Davidson's image of a pregnant African-American woman from the book *East 100th Street* (1970). As Laura Wexler and Sandra Matthews have noted about the image, it "uses a familiar trope of exoticism on an unfamiliar subject, offering up the pregnant figure as a passive odalisque, ripe for the male gaze. Perhaps because the woman is black and pictured in poor, crumbling surroundings, class and race-based conventions allow her to be more openly objectified."³² *Yo Mama At Home*, by contrast, is none of these things. Seated on an elegant wooden bench in an NYC loft, Cox, nude and pregnant, appears cool and collected as she gazes back at the viewer. Nor does Cox succumb to the damage that pregnancy generally wreaks on the body. Both *Yo Mama* and *Yo Mama The Sequel* depict a firm, taut body—one that appears to have never even experienced the pregnancy that has resulted in the two beautiful children. Cox's partner, according to Liss, is of Caucasian descent. The muscular and very healthy bodies of the children contradict the Eugenicists' claim that miscegenation would certainly result in degeneracy and deformity. Looking at Cox and her children, it appears that the more likely result is a super race of incredibly strong and attractive people. Cox has managed to "get her body back" not once, but twice. Getting the pre-partum body back, is, as Hilary Cunningham has noted, a class-based, generally Caucasian achievement: "Today, the postpartum body of white America is still slim,

still attractive, and it belongs to women continuing to wrestle with the archetypal home-work dichotomy. But it is also a body that increasingly is associated with women who are 'sexy' and 'wealthy'—in other words, these are the bodies of the elite super-moms who now set a kind of body standard for all mothers."³³ Cox's insertion of her own body into this movie star and super model narrative of hot body to baby to hot body again is startling precisely because she is "black" and yet refuses to adhere to the codes that govern representations of black women. Rendered something other than middle-class through her unapologetic nudity, she remains less rather than more like Demi Moore, in spite of the similarities between their bodies. As Liss puts it, "Cox's courageous and exquisite self-representations and family portraits challenge us to envision black female bodies as new terrain for expanding black maternal visibility, for giving evidence of the tremendous strength involved in vulnerability and caring."³⁴

At least part of the power of Cox's unashamed images of pregnancy and motherhood comes from the fact that she is part of a world where pregnancy and childbirth are regarded by women and men alike with suspicion and mistrust. According to Liss, the fellow participants in the Whitney Museum of Art program greeted the news of her second pregnancy with shock and amazement, clearly unable to imagine anything more foreign than wanting to be pregnant.

In 1992, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* published a forum entitled "On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie," for which they requested contributions from dozens of women artists on the intersection of motherhood and art.³⁶ Many responded, although more than one artist wondered how the editors had discovered that she even had a child, so separate did they keep them from their careers. One artist who did not hide the fact that she had children was Myrel Chernick, the curator of *Maternal Metaphors*, who wrote that she wished it were not so difficult for women "to both create and procreate." Although Chernick lamented that she did not have the time that she wished she had in order to make her work, she has managed to put together an astonishing number of

installations, many of them dealing with the relationship between being a mother and being a person with agency and subjectivity. In the video installation *Mommy Mommy* from 1994, a television set playing a video of a headless woman holding a baby is placed on the same chair that the woman had occupied earlier. The video begins with a scene from Stella Dallas, where Barbara Stanwyck, the epitome of the self-sacrificing mother, holds her screaming child and tells her "there, there, mother's here." Just prior to that, a young child (Chernick's daughter Tanya) wearing a flowered dress is shown calling for Mommy, insistently and expectantly. In between are scenes of one mother holding her calm baby and another holding her screaming baby, over which a fairytale, the genders changed to protect the guilty, is narrated. Scenes of Chernick's twins, six years old at the time, make it all too clear how quickly children become acclimatized to gender codes. In the fairytale told by Chernick's son, a wizard turns into an evil witch, who is then killed. Chernick's daughter, on the other hand, sings to a plastic doll very much as the real mothers soothe their babies. The message is clear: the mother, who is an overwhelming and significant force for the small child, is gradually "killed" off as the child gets older and moves further and further away from the original unity that he or she shared with the mother. For the male child, this ritual death is often violent; the female child, on the other hand, kills her mother through incorporation, becoming the mother herself. The only hope is the altered fairytale, which features a princess rather than a prince as the hero and dragon slayer. "Is the mother's power a fairytale?" Chernick asks. "She is a myth: Powerful to her child, but soon repudiated."³⁶

In *On the Table* (1996), Chernick takes on the larger myth of the good/bad 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 set shows women sitting at that table while narrating incidents about their mothers. These incidents range from bizarre—one mother uses a blackhead remover



RENEE COX
Yo Mama at Home, 1993
 Gelatin silver print,
 48 in. X 48 in.



MYREL CHERNICK
Aura, Carmen and Dialectical Porn Rocks, 1991,
 Digital print, 13 in. 19 in.

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 accompanies her daughter to her future university 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 different classes, races, ages, and gender 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 suggestion that what motherhood is or is not is very much based on a variety of social factors. The other television set, playing in black and white, alternates between images of Chernick and her family having breakfast at the Formica table, women's hands 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. An attractive woman who was “a former cocktail waitress,” Crimmins denied that she had murdered her children right up until her conviction. 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. The fact that Crimmins' children were murdered is almost beside the point.

“This I know for sure,” Chernick wrote to the editors at *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*. “The children grow up, and so quickly that

time with them becomes an even more precious commodity. And the art world will not go away.”³⁷ When Chernick wrote those words, her children were barely in first grade. As they get ready to go to college, Chernick has returned to an ongoing project that she began many years ago entitled *Artists, Artwork, Mothers, Children*, representing more than fifteen years worth of work. Many of these photographs come as something of a shock, given that some of the artists are not known for having had children. Playing on the trope of the discreet black and white photograph of the artist published in catalogues and textbooks, Chernick brings artist, artwork, and child together in one place. Jenny Holzer and her small daughter Lili are photographed in front of one of Holzer's signature signs with the word mother on it. Aura Rosenberg's tender interactions with a very young Carmen who happily plays with the components of her mother's installation make it clear that Carmen is more than simply fodder for Rosenberg's career.

Being a working artist and a mother in our capitalist-driven art world is difficult at best, impossible at worst. And yet, the warm interaction between mothers and children in *Artists, Artwork, Mothers, Children* suggests otherwise. It seems somehow appropriate that Chernick is examining the relationship between working mothers and their children at this time, given the number of articles that have recently appeared on mothers who have advanced degrees but have chosen to stay home with their children instead of continuing to work. These mothers, all of them upper middle-class, seem to accept the end of their professional aspirations with a disconcerting Stepford wife calm. Chernick's artist/mothers, by contrast, are unique individuals with a singular vision who have decided not to give up their careers.³⁸ They are not, however, alone in their experience of mothering and being mothers. As Adrienne Rich wrote about her own experience, “slowly I came to understand the paradox contained in ‘my’ experience of motherhood; that, although different from many other women's experiences it was not unique; and that only in shedding the illusion of my uniqueness could I hope, as a woman, to have any authentic life at all.”³⁹

Notes

1. The image of Coatlique from *Our Lady of Los Angeles* can be found at <http://www.womansbuilding.org/wb/imagedisplay.php?dir=disc0013&img=ot131066.jpg> accessed March 13, 2004. An image of the real Coatlique can be seen on numerous websites, including that of the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, <http://sunsite.unam.mx/antropol/>.
2. Cheri Gaulke and Sue Maberry, who are partners, subsequently did have twin girls. Their conception is the subject of a video entitled *The Sea of Time* (1992).
3. Sara Ruddick, "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth," in *Representations of Motherhood*, Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrere Kaplan, ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 30.
4. For a discussion of the prevalence of these mother stereotypes, even recently, see E. Ann Kaplan, "Sex, Work, and Motherhood: Maternal Subjectivity in Recent Culture," included in *Representations of Motherhood and Motherhood and representation: The mother in popular culture and melodrama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).
5. Juli Carson, "Mea Culpa: A Conversation with Mary Kelly," *Art Journal* 58 n.4 (Winter 1999). Accessed through Proquest/Academic Search Elite.
6. Mary Kelly, "Desiring Imaging/Imaging Desire," *Mary Kelly* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1997), 123.
7. Gail S. Rebhan. Artist's Statement: Babies 1986.
8. Kelly has authored two books in addition to numerous articles. See Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Boston: MIT Press, 1998), and *Post-Partum Document* (London: Routledge 1993).
9. See Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
10. Holland Cotter, "Review: Judy Glantzman," *Arts* (November 1984)
11. Judy Glantzman, E-mail to the Author, dated March 8, 2004
12. A type of writing, defined by French feminist theorists Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, that is open-ended, playful, and corporeal—exactly the opposite of masculine writing which is linear, serious, and detached.
13. Paula Modersohn-Becker died as a result of complications from the birth of her first child. Her images of mothers were painted before she actually became one.
14. Susan Rubin Suleiman, "Writing and Motherhood," *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, Moyra Davey, ed. (New York and London: Seven Stories Press 2001), 117.
15. Ibid, 125.
16. Aura Rosenberg, Artist's Statement, n.d.
17. Suleiman, "Playing and Motherhood; or, How to Get the Most Out of the Avant-Garde," first published in *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). Quotation taken from the revised version of the essay published in Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, eds. *Representations of Motherhood*, 273.
18. Robert Mahoney, "Aura Rosenberg, 'Who am I, What am I, Where am I?'" *Time Out New York*, Issue No. 173 January 14–21, 1999
19. Also see "Forum on Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie," in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: contemporary art issues* 12 (November 1992):3–42, for a collection of candid responses from women who are both mothers and artists.
20. Monica Bock, "Maternal Exposure," *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 3 n.1 (Spring/Summer 2001): 58.
21. See my article "Motherhood" *New Art Examiner* (March 2001): 16–23 in which I discuss this piece.
22. Zofia Burr, *Dedication*, reprinted in Bock, "Maternal Exposure," 61.
23. Sara Webb, Artists Statement—*milk and tears*, January 2001.
24. Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction," *Signs* 28, n. 1 (Autumn 2002): 5.
25. McMahon also made a video of the piece called *Scorpio is Bright* (2003).
26. Judy Gelles, *When We Were Ten: A photo/text story of a mother and her son* (Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop, 1997), 2.
27. Gail S. Rebhan, *Mother-Son Talk: A dialogue between a mother and her young sons* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop 1996), 26.
28. Gelles, 31.
29. Most of my information about eugenics comes from the excellent web site Eugenics Archive, found at <http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/>. I would like to thank Dr. Sandra Esslinger for bringing this archive to my attention and for her invaluable comments about the relationship between the ideology of motherhood and eugenic theory.
30. Ruddick, "Talking About 'Mothers'" from *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989). Quotation taken from *Mother Reader*, 189.
31. Andrea Liss, "Black Bodies in Evidence," *The Familial Gaze*, Marianne Hirsch, ed. (Dartmouth College: University Press of New England, 1999), 281.
32. Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler, *Pregnant Pictures* (New York and London: Routledge 2000), 42.
33. Hilary Cunningham, "Prodigal bodies: Pop culture and post-pregnancy," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 43, n.1 (Summer 2002), 434.
34. Liss, 289.
35. Susan Bee, Mira Schor, eds, "Forum: On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie," *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* #12 (November 1992): 3–42.
36. Myrel Chernick, Artist Statement n.d.
37. Chernick, "Forum: On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie," 11.
38. The most egregious of these articles is that published by *Time Magazine*. "The Case for Moms Staying Home," *Time Magazine* 163, n. 12 (March 22, 2004). This article barely takes into account the fact that many of these women are upper middle-class, rather than poor and unable to give up working.
39. Adrienne Rich, "Anger and Tenderness" from *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), quoted here from *Mother Reader*, 97



JUDY GLANTZMAN
Untitled, 2004 (above)
Untitled, 2003
 Oil paint on canvas, 80 in. X 70 in.





AURA ROSENBERG
Jim Shaw/Joe Sienna,
 (left) 1996
Kiki Smith/Carmen
 C-prints,
 40 in. X 30 in.



AURA ROSENBERG
Mike Kelly/ Carmen
 (left) 1997
Laurie Simmons/Lena
 C-prints,
 40 in. X 30 in.



MONICA BOCK

Tooth for a Tooth, 2004

Sterling silver, wood. Installation dimensions variable.

Each shelf 1.75 in. h X 4.5 in. w X 2.5 in. d.

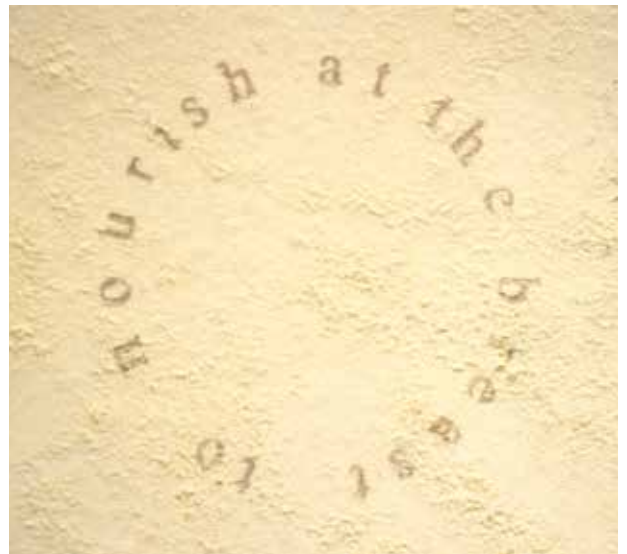
Each set of teeth approx. 1 in. h X 2 in. w X 2 in. d.



SARAH E WEBB, *milk and tears*, 2001 (above), birdseye weave cloth diapers, thread; 25 running feet installed and (below), detail



SARAH E WEBB, *mère/mer*, 2001
Powdered milk, sea salt, 18 running feet installed, detail





MARION WILSON
The Artificer's Twin, 2003 (above)
The Grand Thaumaturge, 2003 (left)
Blushing Yaksa, 2003 (right)
 Bronze with patina,
 each 24 in. 3 8 in. 3 8 in.

Myrel Chernick
On the Table, 1996
 Table, chairs,
 television sets
 and videotapes



Myrel Chernick
Mommy Mommy, 1994
 Table, television set and
 videotape





RENEE COX
Yo Mama the Sequel, 1995
Gelatin silver print,
85 in. X 49 in.



JUDY GELLES
Living Room
Self Portrait Watching the
Soaps, 1979
 Black and white Iris prints,
 16 in. 3 20 in.
 Printed in 2004

June 10, 1979
Living Room



March 3, 1979

On Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday afternoon Jason is at nursery school and David naps, and I have one and one half hours of free time to be creative and do important things

The Body in Question: Rethinking Motherhood, Alterity and Desire

Andrea Liss

In my continuous research toward thinking difference and desire other than markers of discrimination and inscriptions of unidirectional control, I turned to feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz's writing on ethics:

In the work of French feminists, ethics is not opposed to politics but is a continuation of it within the domain of relations between self and other. Ethics need not imply a moral or normative code, or a series of abstract regulative principles. Rather, it is the working out or negotiation between an other (or others) seen as prior to and pre-given for the subject, and a subject. Ethics is a response to the recognition of the primacy of alterity over identity. Ethics, particularly in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, is that field defined by the other's need, the other's calling on the subject for response. In this case, *the paradigm of an ethical relation is that of a mother's response to the needs or requirements of a child*.¹ (emphasis added)

I knew that my attraction to Grosz's way of thinking, even in this short excerpt, would yield areas of touching between difference and desire. The strategic import of recognizing interpersonal relations as political investment. Making room for an other who would not be construed as so distant that there could be no points of convergence between self and other. Not confusing places of merging as sameness. Respecting independent otherness. As I continued reading, my musing/theorizing came to a halt when I reached the point in Grosz's discussion where the mother was introduced. I was riveted by her representation, following Emmanuel Levinas, that the perfect exemplar of the ethical relationship is that of the mother's lack of selfhood ("the primacy of alterity over identity") and her complete giving to the child. Indeed, is this not a contemporary reworking of the all-too-pervasive legacy of the sacrificial (virgin) mother? My feminist-mother self felt betrayed. How disheartening to find, in a book titled *Sexual Subversions*, the figure of mother again, ad infinitum,

at the selfless center bearing the burden of representation and singular responsibility. We can't blame Grosz, my microconversation with myself continued, she's not speaking for herself. She's offering a concise recapitulation of Levinas's complex and alluring conception of self and other in an encounter where they might meet in the new space of alterity.² Yet, for all of Levinas's attempts to detour the self-righteousness embedded in much of Judeo-Christian ethics in order to reconfigure an expanded sense of self, he nonetheless falls into some central unquestioned biblical conventions. This often occurs in the instances when he weaves the figures of woman and mother into his writing.³

Feeling I had fairly well satisfied my unease with that portion of Grosz's passage, I wanted to move on. But I couldn't cut myself loose from it: "the paradigm of an ethical relation is that of a mother's response to the needs or requirements of a *child*." Wait a minute. There was something oddly impersonal in this description of the most perfect of intersubjective ethical relations. Why didn't the passage read "her child" rather than "a child"? Was this distancing the author's perhaps unconscious fear of the child and/or her recognition of the impossibility of the mother in this paradigmatic relation?

It's 2:30 Pm already. Naptime at The Song of Songs Preschool. Miles is probably in luxurious sleep by now. I feel myself relax a bit. This is time I couldn't be with him anyway, so theoretically it doesn't have to be as productive as the hours when he is awake and out of the house. If only he could be transported here during naptime so we could be in each other's presence. I could continue to work, feel my love for him, but not have to attend to any of the care giving. So I'm not the most ethical mother.

When Levinas was thinking about the ethical mother, he did not endow her to muse on child care, economic or professional concerns. But Marx and Darwin weren't thinking about their mothers at all. Freud thought about his perhaps in

excess. Rather than being theoretically violated as the site of sensational lack as in Freud's conception, the Levinasian mother has the agency of caring, of not turning the other cheek. Caring and empathy, you (and I) might say, are the quintessential qualities traditionally coded as feminine, maternal. Who wants them? Let's give them up. But watch out, what we just gave away could become valued commodities and we'll be written out of the profits. An infinitely more difficult strategy whose benefits would be longer term, however, is to embrace just these qualities and not allow them to be kept solely in the private realm, assigned to their "proper place." Much more subversive is to embrace maternal giving and set it into motion in unexpected places rather than to passively/aggressively let it be stolen from us and allow ourselves to become men-women in a man's world. In other words, to grant oneself the gift of what is normally taken for granted.

At stake then is strategically negotiating between engrained codes of maternity and embracing the lived complexities of chosen motherhood. This, as you can imagine, is hazardous double labor. There is no other body so cruelly and poignantly posed at the edges dividing the public and private realms. The issue may still be so silent, too, because of the uncertainties surrounding the issue of sacrifice related to women in a supposedly "post-feminist" culture. The dilemma becomes, indeed, how to speak of the difficulties and incomparable beauties of making space for another unknown person without having those variously inflected and complex experiences turned into clichés of what enduring motherhood is supposed to be. Such tyrannical moves occur in the propaganda where the diverse complexities are so flatly neutralized that the (feminist) mother finds part of herself being dumbly celebrated as the paradigm of domesticity and compliance to the limits of passivity in the (perverse) name of patriotism. Especially if that public mother has stepped too far out of her assigned place. Remember Hillary Rodham Clinton reduced to participating in a chocolate-chip cookie bake-off with Barbara Bush? The (Im)Moral Majority's failed rhetoric is also embedded, however differently and unconsciously, in the minds of

many feminists. There is the silent sympathetic assumption that we will involuntarily lose part of our thinking creative (male) minds when children are born from our all-too-female bodies.

How could I blame them for thinking this? During pregnancy and immediately afterward, I had my own always-in-flux fears. My anxieties kept the body and mind intact, time is what I couldn't make sense of. "Will you be going back to work in three months?" asked one of my maternity nurses in the disembodied voice of an unemployment benefits officer. Little did she know that my life was about constantly thinking and working. Her foreign question was unwelcome and lodged itself in the private hospital room made public where my newborn child and I had come to know each other for only one day.

Then there is the false belief that these equally mindless creatures called infants will turn our heads to mush from our so-called idle hours of adoration or devour us by their own frighteningly relentless bodily needs. The hazards in approaching these half-truths are that, of course, these conditions exist, if only partially and temporarily. The taboo against representing motherhood again strikes deep because the real pleasures of caring for a new other and falling in love again differently are tyrannically conflated with essentialized, feminized qualities projected as implacable and designed to keep us assigned to our proper places. The "truth" is that we are constantly in motion, are never only in one place. We work against allowing "mother" to slip into a place of nostalgia for the norm. The mind and body of the mother are constantly in labor.

I wonder if I am risking too much here, conjoining my voice as an art historian-critic with my newly acquired mother chords/cords? In a rare public forum on motherhood initiated by Mira Schor and Susan Bee in their *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* magazine (No. 12, November 1992), the editors posed a series of questions to a diverse group of women artists who are mothers. These included, "How has being a mother affected people's response or reaction to your artwork? How has it affected your career? Did you postpone starting your career or stop working

when your children were young?" May Stevens chose not to respond to the questions the editors addressed to her. Here is what she offered as a counter-response:

How many artists are fathers? How has it affected their work, people's response to their work, their careers? Did Jeff Koons or Frank Stella postpone their careers in order to take their responsibilities as fathers seriously? Did Pace, Castelli, Sonnabend, or Mary Boone discriminate against Schnabel, Salle, or Marden because of fatherhood?...

I will be happy to discuss questions of motherhood after your journal seriously researches fatherhood among artists. In the present, when women bring up children alone and bear primary—often sole—responsibility, financial and emotional, for the next generation, it's fatherhood that needs looking at. (p.40)

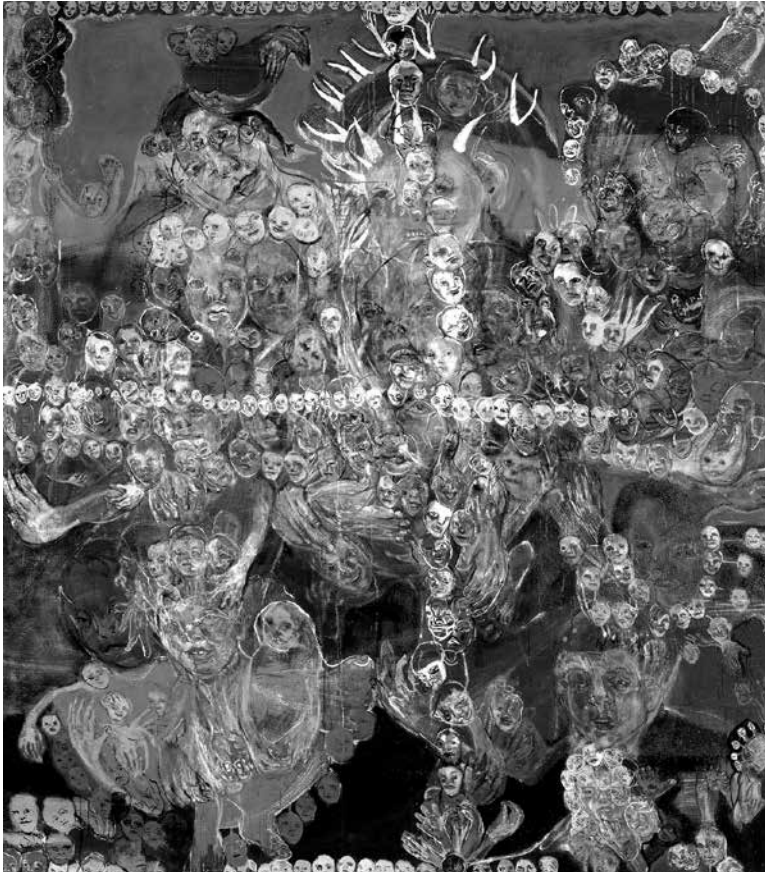
Indeed, Steven's warning call is absolutely necessary, lest public discussions of the dilemmas facing artist-mothers involuntarily shield the "prolific artist" father who so gratuitously moves between the public and private realms. But such a warning cannot be sent at the cost of silencing the mother, again. Indeed, as the editors wrote in their introduction to the forum, "[T]he subject proved too painful for some artists who couldn't write responses. More than one artist wondered how we'd found out that she *bad* a child, so separate had children been kept from art world life." (p.3) When I recently told a male academic colleague that I was writing an essay on motherhood and representation, he enthusiastically suggested that there must be a great deal of visual work on the subject. He said, "I would think that it would be natural." "What is 'natural' is the repression," I responded. It's about time the taboo was unleashed, for mother's sake. As Dena Shottenkirk so aptly put it in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*:

Like morality, good manners, and a criminal record, motherhood has nothing to do with making art. Its presence neither improves one's ability, nor does it sap one's creativity like Nietzsche's worried model of having one's vital powers drained from sperm ejaculations. Giving birth does not automatically mean giving up. (p.34)

The "one's ability" and "one's creativity" in this section of Shottenkirk's account is strategically interpolated as both male and female. It is women, however, who give birth. And, as artist Joan Snyder put it, "The bottom line is that you don't have to be a mother or a daughter to be discriminated against in the art world...you just have to be a woman." (p.37)

At stake in breaching this taboo and giving birth to a new provocation is recognizing that motherhood and woman are passed over in the unacknowledged name of devalued labor, whether in procreation or artistic-thinking activity, within a patriarchal scheme crafted to inflate supposedly male qualities of rigor and singularly driven creativity. The uneven distribution of interest between woman and artist-thinker becomes all the more cruelly amortized in the case of mother as artist-thinker. "Mother" hovers as the uneasy subset to "woman" as well as silently operating as its unacknowledged frame. The devaluation of mother is always at once the devaluation of women. Conversely, and especially in relation to the current hateful debates and legal dogma against abortion, the degradation of women/woman is being forcibly exercised on her decision not to mother. "Mother" takes on an especially irregular symmetry to women/woman. Psychoanalytically construed, woman is always at a loss. The exception to her lesser condition is pregnancy, which gives her a provisional status of phallic proportions and privilege—another of Freud's dreams of plenitude. She immediately loses that privilege in the postpartum state. She is further insulted through the processes by which her children gain accession to "proper" or normal sexual coding. The young boy is traumatized by the difference in his and his mother's genitals; her gaping hole (we are inclined to write this abyss as a whole) signals primordial lack. He can proclaim what he has as distinct from hers and find clear-cut identification with the father. And with that, he can take a sigh of relief.

Have you ever tried to tell your young son that he has what his father has? I recently asked my three-year-old if he thought his genitals were like his daddy's. "Oh yukky, mommy," he most independently proclaimed, "daddy's are dad-



JUDY GLANTZMAN
Untitled, 2004
 Oil paint on canvas,
 80 in. X 70 in.



AURA ROSENBERG
Mike/Bogyi, 1997
 C-print, 40 in. X 30 in.



MONICA BOCK, *Sunday News (Daughter)*, 2001
 Lead frame, newspaper clipping, antique doily, baby
 teeth, painted wood pedestal.
 Installation with pedestal: 8 1/4 in. X 38 in. X 5 in.

dy's, and mine are mine." "Do you have balls, mommy?" he then asked. "No," I replied, "I have doors, and openings and other things inside." Miles looked at me thoughtfully, "Oh, that's good." Pause. "Can we make Jell-O now?"

According to the psychoanalytic scheme, the daughter's sense of identification is more marred, less distinct (we would write it as infused with oscillation, open-ended). Because the sign of "mature" sexual development in psychoanalytic terms is separation, the girl too must make her leave of the mother. But imagine her dilemma: she has what the mother has but must denounce it. This disavowal must not be too strong lest the young girl loses all identification with the mother and tries to accede toward male identity. She must not cast off the memory of her own tainted incompleteness for it is her legacy to pass it on. The girl then becomes a mother and must undergo a triple debasement—her daughter's repudiation. So for the mother, Freud's deaccessioning of the feminine is a multiple site of violation. If woman is bodiless and the daughter is always the indistinct shadow of her mother, the mother (once a daughter) bears the impossible burden of being both the figure of invisibility and the embodiment of vulnerability, of exposed body. So the asymmetrical relation of mother to women/woman becomes even more acute. Between "woman" (the projection) and women (the deceitful ones who don't match up, who always inscribe their multiple selves onto the scene) there is forceful play. Ironically, "mother" has not been accorded an oscillating, de-referential term that acknowledges there is a real mother and that there are both grave and joyful differences between tyrannical expectations and lived experience. "(M)other" thus conflates the uneasy absence/ presence of the mother's body in the non-space between palpable body and its impossible representation.⁴

Father's Day, 1989. I am ten moons pregnant and could give birth any minute. My brother is given a package of wildflowers to disseminate, although everyone's eyes are on me. So I take out the snapshots of a recent bike-riding jaunt, half forgetting/remembering that the roll also contains frames of my posed naked pregnantness. No one said anything until the

photographs reached my husband's mother. "I didn't know you were such an exhibitionist!" she shrieked. I enjoyed her embarrassed surprise, for it seemed to be ever-so-coyly tinged with her own mischievous delight. So let the prepartum gazes be multiple. What I had been thinking about was making traces of pregnancy for myself and for my then-opaque child, far from the Demi Moore glamor on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.⁵ Not to promenade my body, but to show her/him that there are no stigmata attached.

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

"Don't you think that risks reifying essentialism?" was the response one of my feminist colleagues gave me when I told her I was inviting into the classroom the facts, falsities and experiences of my being a mother. "No," I remember saying, "I am scheming on my 'mother' identity in order to bring out multiple, conflictive responses and encourage new ways of thinking." The conversation did not progress on those grounds and turned to more "objective" discussions of which feminist writers we were currently reading. What I would want to say, to continue the discussion, is that when only one student in my Feminist Issues class brings in an image of a mother to my call for images of working women, we have much more work to do. I would want to say that, indeed, this strategy does verge on provocative ways of acknowledging the body of woman/mother, those sensual and very sexy virgin spaces that must be conceived. That such conceptions help to breach the very obdurate wall of fear that has so vehemently separated women's public and private lives. Call it essentialism if you like, but realize that such name-calling wrapped in binarism risks its own stultification.

I would rather use my body as a site of knowledge than rhetorically give it up.

As feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti thinks it:

The “body” in question is the threshold of subjectivity: as such it is neither the sum of its organs—a fixed biological essence—nor the result of social conditioning—a historical entity. The “body” is rather to be thought of as the point of intersection, as the interface between the biological and the social, that is to say between the socio-political field of the microphysics of power and the subjective dimension.⁶

Braidotti further writes that this multifaceted way of thinking the body “opens a field of possible ‘becoming’.” (p. 102)

To assert the sexed bodily “I” of the woman then becomes, indeed, a doubled and risky reinvestment in the body of mother. Claiming there is a body in the maternal subject might be, to some, stating the obvious. But in the face of this “natural body,” this material presence, the patriarchal mode has manufactured the mother/woman into a site upon which it occupies feminine territory as mystery, artificiality and emptiness. To reassert the sexed “I” of the mother engages her sexuality in a new field of becoming.

It is altogether fitting that Luce Irigaray’s body of thinking would surface in any discussion about reinvesting the name of the mother. What I would like to highlight here is the special significance Irigaray gives to the body of woman and the doubled rhetorical insistence she accords the body of mother. Through her incisive and strategically “excessive” language, language rejoicing in women’s bodily fluids and mindful openings, Irigaray renders psychoanalysis’s feigned posturing an impostor. That is, male-inflected psychoanalytic theory tells us that we are being too literal if we read the phallus as solely biological and confined only to male member/ownership. It functions, after all, as a figure and a sign. But, let’s remember, there is no corollary ambiguity when it comes to female members. Irigaray plays on this unbridgeable difference with a vengeance:

Speculation whirls round faster and faster as it pierces, bores, drills into a volume that is supposed to be *solid* still...Whipped along spinning, twirling faster and faster until matter shatters into pieces crumble into dust. Or into the substance of language? The matrix discourse? The mother’s “body”?...*The/a woman never closes up into a volume*... But the woman and the mother are not mirrored in the same fashion. A double secularization in and between her/them is already in place. And more. For the sex of woman is not one.⁷

“Ethics...is that field defined by the other’s needs, the other’s calling on the subject for a response. In this case, the paradigm of an ethical relation is that of a mother’s response to the needs or requirements of a child.” It has been two and a half years since that passage, in the echo of Levinas, arrested me. It seemed an impossible burden for the mother (me, and many others) to bear. Even outside of the mother paradigm, it has been noted that Levinas’s philosophy puts an enormous weight of ethicalness not only on the subject, but also on the other who is asked to call the subject to responsibility.⁸ Yet the mother’s responsibility no longer seems so formidable. In the Levinasian sense, it simply is. And one responds. Responding and giving to the child’s utter otherness is, indeed, an act of sacrifice. Rather than construing the mother-child relation as an essentialized binding, the coupling can be embraced as yielding the fruits of reciprocal relations. The task now is to think the mother-child paradigm in its material complexities as well as a metaphor for new relations of alterity between sexes, races and classes. In relation to the infamous Baby M case, feminist legal contract lawyer Patricia J. Williams juxtaposes her mixed ancestry with the legal ramifications of “likeness”:

A white woman giving totally to a black child; a black child totally and demandingly dependent for everything, for sustenance itself, from a white woman. The image of a white woman suckling a black child; the image of a black child sucking for its life from the bosom of a white woman. The utter interdependence of such an image; the selflessness, the merging it implies; the giving up of boundary; the encompassing of other within self; the unbounded

generosity, the interconnectedness of such an image. Such a picture says that there is no difference; it places the hope of continuous generation, of immortality of the white self in a little black face.⁹

Indeed, embedded in the notion of sacrifice is the act of giving. This giving need not always devalue her/him by giving under unfavorable conditions, but may be construed as enhancing the giver through the offering. To attempt to represent the unrepresentable, shifting beauties of being a mother to a very specific child is also to acknowledge our historical inscription as gendered bodies while refusing boundaries and reinscribing desire. Be/coming different: outside of oneself, inside the other, in both places at once. Neither occupying nor dominating. To love without domination might then be a coming to understand that one cannot overwhelm, cannot completely inhabit, cannot “have” the other. To love without overtaking might then be an admission of distance, a recognition of sorrow. A little bit of figurative mourning. The geographies of self expanding. Succumbing as powerful abandon.

“Mommy, are you done writing about women?” In his tenderly demanding voice issuing forth with uncanny timing, Miles interrupts my reverie. I cross over the threshold between mindful musing and maternal imperative, a space women/ mothers have been crossing for an eternity, knowing that my work on both sides of the portal will never be finished.

Notes

This essay is a shortened version of the original text. The full text first appeared in “The Body in Question: Rethinking Motherhood, Alterity and Desire,” in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, eds. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven (New York: Harper-Collins, 1994) pp.80-96.

1. Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) p. xvii.
2. For Grosz’s reading of Levinas’s notion of alterity through Luce Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference, see her Chapter 5 in the book cited above. For Luce Irigaray’s reading of Levinas and the touch of the other, see her “Fecundity of the Caress,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 231-56. For Levinas’s own writings, see especially his *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1978), “Ethics and the Face,” in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1981).

3. Jacques Derrida notes Levinas’s ambiguity toward “woman’s place” in “Choreographies,” interview with Christie V. McDonald, *Diacritics* (Summer 1982) pp. 72-73, footnote 5. Is it interesting that Jacques Derrida, who himself weaves the figure of woman into some impossible projections (her “non-essence” within the fantasy of artificiality), would be so attentive to these slippages. For Derrida’s use of the figure of woman, see especially the “Choreographies” interview as well as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Displacement and the Discourse of Woman,” in *Displacement: Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983) pp.164-95 and her essay “Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiating with Unacknowledged Masculinism,” in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) pp. 206-23.
4. The mother’s in-between space of ever-presence and invisibility was again brought to the cultural surface when I was in search of the important and wonderful book *Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities*, eds. Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). I first went to find it at a college bookstore whose critical studies section is especially good and whose buyer is very conscientious. When I queried him about why this particular reference was not ordered, he responded self-consciously, “I thought it was too specialized.”
5. Annie Leibovitz’s photographs of a seven-month’s pregnant Demi Moore were featured in *Vanity Fair’s* August 1991 issue. As cited in the magazine’s October 1991 issue, in the United States alone ninety-five different television spots on the photographs reached 110 million viewers; sixty-four radio shows on thirty-one different stations were devoted to the subject; and more than 1,500 newspaper articles and editorial cartoons were generated. The movie star’s nude appearance was also noticed in publication in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan and South America. In a paper given by Susan Kandel on May 9, 1992, at the Whitney Museum’s 15th Annual Symposium on American Art and Culture, whose theme was “Femininity and Masculinity: The Construction of Gender and the Transgression of Boundaries in 20th-Century American Art and Culture,” the author noted the “while the self-righteous on the right lambasted the photos’ flamboyant immodesty, the well-intentioned on the left hailed its progressiveness.” In her paper Kandel makes the crucial point that despite the photographs’ insistence that sexuality and motherhood are not mutually exclusive, their feigned feminism “is fashioned out of a set of conventions peculiar to the little-known subgenre of pregnancy porn: belly displayed as if it were—to borrow from the pornographic lexicon—tits, ass or bush; and woman displayed as an expanded object, happily complicit both with her expansion and her objectification.”
6. Rosi Braidotti, “The Politics of Ontological Difference,” in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, cited above (n.3) p. 97.
7. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) pp. 238-39.
8. See Alphonso Lingis’s translator’s introduction to Levinas’s works cited above (n. 2).
9. Patricia J. Williams, “On Being the Object of Property,” *Signs*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): p. 15. William’s poignant and powerful essay conjoins personal and rhetorically autobiographical voices with her knowledge of the law field to think the possibilities of rewriting personal property contracts. Such contracts might be flexible enough to respond to racial, class and gender inequalities as well as changing emotions and appreciations of the normally nonremunerated acts of loving and caring for the elderly.



MARY KELLY
Primapara, 1974
 Manicure/Pedicure Series,
 10 units
 Gelatin silver print,
 10.5 in. X 8.5 in.

MYREL CHERNICK
Judy, Lila and Untitled Painting, 2004
 Digital print, 13 in. X 19 in.



On Re-Reading Ellen, Joan, Myrel...

Moyra Davey

The most deeply pleasurable, gratifying form of reading is the one undertaken with a view to writing; and by and large, most of what I've had occasion to write has taken root in and grown out of the soil of reading. It is now five years since I began editing *Mother Reader: Essential Writings On Motherhood*, an anthology of writings by thirty-six women on the themes of maternal ambivalence and the intersection of motherhood and creative life. Three of the artists in the *Maternal Metaphors* show—Myrel Chernick, Ellen McMahon and Mary Kelly contributed to *Mother Reader*, and many other authors from the collection including Jane Lazarre, Adrienne Rich and Tillie Olsen are profoundly important to artists and writers who are mothers. Clearly *Mother Reader* shares an intimacy of purpose and identification with the *Maternal Metaphors* project.

Asked to write for Myrel's catalogue I decided to revisit *Mother Reader*, not in any systematic way, but selectively, motivated by the state of things in my life now. On the one hand I was guided by a desire to reconnect with some of the voices that prefigured a good deal of my experience of motherhood and kept me company, sometimes daily like a mantra—for instance Joan Snyder's phrase from her poem to Molly: "*There is the 57 yr old that needs to do Yoga faster than time to keep me strong to paint never mind a child*"¹ is one such utterance forever lodged in my brain. On the other hand, I've read indulgently, haphazardly, following my nose. And so there was something of a "taking stock" at work as I returned to the texts that had imprinted themselves upon me, but also a sense of discovery and awe as I read again, this time not with an editor's judgement, but with the true *jouissance* of the reader. Below are my notes (inspired by Susan Griffin) on that reading experience:

Early February, 2004

Re-reading Myrel Chernick, Ellen McMahon, Mary Kelly, and the half dozen or so visual artists from the collection I am struck yet again by their brilliance and wit, and by the incisiveness of their revelations about motherhood. I laugh out loud at Ellen's tragic-comic descriptions of the dramas enacted by her young daughters (now statuesque teenagers). And Joan Snyder's send-off to Molly about to enter college makes me cry.

PURE joy upon reading Ursula Le Guin again. I have read her essay on numerous occasions...how can it be that THIS feels like the first time? Le Guin is unsurpassed. (Why did I gravitate to Le Guin again, now? Well, because she writes about Woolf, and women writing and reading, all subjects of limitless interest and fascination.)

Le Guin begins with a fraught, abject image: a women writing in the kitchen while

the kids howl. And from this she spins and levitates into spectacular realms of lightness and erudition, but also, lucid, enabling pronouncement:

"The one thing a writer has to have is a pencil and some paper."

Mid-February

A small mound of ultra-fine powdery grit has accumulated at the base of a heating pipe next to my desk (and threatens to disperse itself throughout my studio), but I refrain from getting the vacuum cleaner in here to deal with it because I know that once I do that I will spend the next two hours sucking up all the dust from my very dusty apartment, and not writing.

Woolf: *"Writing the body."* Le Guin: *"...pregnancy, birth, nursing, mothering, puberty, menstruation, menopause...housework, childwork, lifework...in losing the artist mother we lose where there's a lot to gain."*

Look in the mirror and lift T-shirt to examine stomach.

Make a cup of tea (and think of Italo Calvino).

Eat an orange to stave off hunger.

Get rid of all toys on desk.

Wonder what happened to period, two weeks late.

...

together

we grow pale

doing dishes,

and answering the telephone.

—Susan Griffin

Sit in sunlight and take note of the sound of stiff notebook pages being turned and pressed down (and make a mental note of that sound to use in a video sound-track some day), and listen to the tiny rattle of my disposable yellow mechanical pencil leaving its soft lead mark on heavy-ish notebook paper. Erase using other end of pencil and forever be reminded of a child methodically correcting a mistake.

Martha Wilson: *"I'm glad to be an old lady with a baby, even though I sometimes get called 'grandmother' on the subway."*

B., age six, looks at the veins on my hands and asks if I'm old. I remember my own repulsion/fascination with my mother's worm-like veins.

Myrel writes: *"This I know for sure: the children grow up, and so quickly that time with them becomes an even more precious commodity."*



ELLEN McMAHON
Suckled IV, 1996-present
Charcoal on Rives BFK
20 in. X 13 in.

Like the 'do yoga' mantra by Joan I can type in the beginning of Myrel's sentence from memory. A little later she spells out 'TIME' in caps, the time she knows will be hers again once her kids grow up (that would be now!) And then there is Käthe Kollwitz's diary entry (from Tillie Olsen's *Silences*) about working after her children have left home, wondering if:

"the 'blessing' isn't missing from such work [now that time is not] so wretchedly limited... Potency, potency is diminishing."

End February

J. takes B. upstate for a few days so that I can meet my deadline, and I take measure of the small emptiness I feel, a hint of what Kollwitz is talking about.

Susan Griffin: *"So that when a woman is finally free of her children's needs, she wants to forget."*

I sit on the bed beside J. in brilliant sunlight, our room filled with a surfeit of warm air from hissing, banging radiator. My skin is dry and stings from a too-hot bath. Look down at the fine spidery lines criss-crossing my chest and breasts.

Dena Shottenkirk, reflecting on the value of private life and time spent with young children, writes: *"People, in the final autumnal days of their lives, rarely delight in their recollection of a day well-worked."*

Perhaps, but in the here and now, it is creative work that redeems our days, and I agree with Vivian Gornick (not in *Mother Reader*) who says that it is work finally, not love, that will save women's lives. That spoken, I recall a moment last summer coming after a stint of work, when I had the choice to stay home in the apartment and keep writing, or go to the country with J. and B. My whole body longed for the simple pleasure of being with them in the woods, and the idea of chaining myself once again to the computer seemed utterly stale and pointless. The clichéd contrast between the health and vigor of the social-outdoors, and solitary introspection in dim light was so physically palpable that I experienced a kind of revulsion for the latter. I chose to go with J. and B. and I did it not for them but for myself.

All italicized quotes are from *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, edited by Moyra Davey, published in 2001 by Seven Stories Press, New York.

MARION WILSON

The Grand Thaumaturge, 2003 (left)

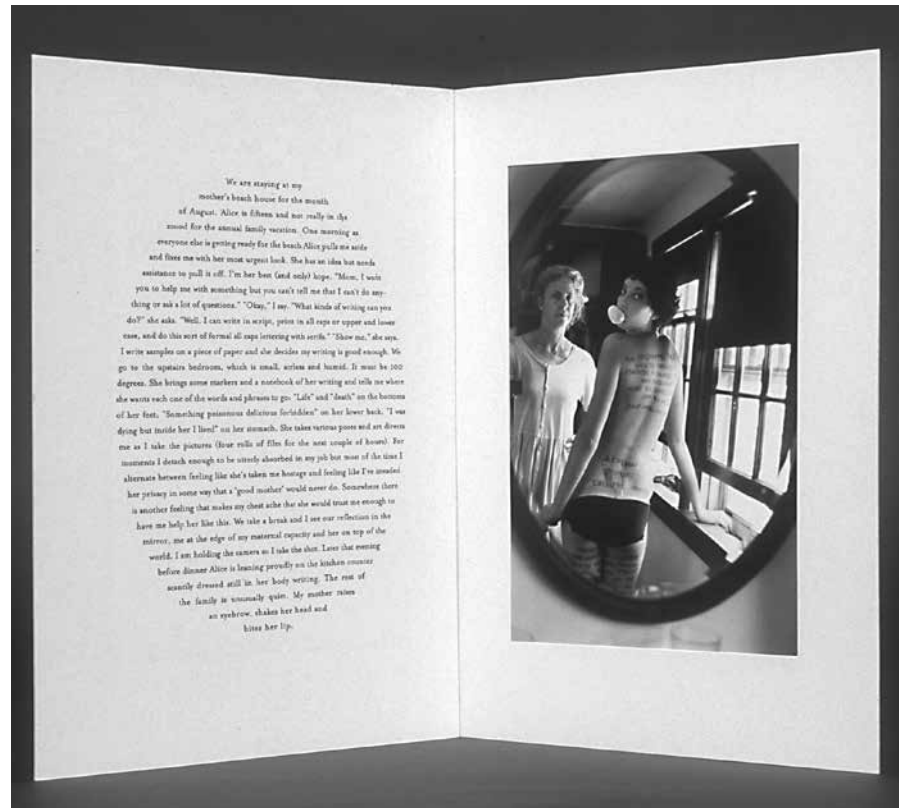
The Artificer's Twin, 2003

Bronze with patina,

each 24 in. X 8 in. X 8 in., detail



ELLEN McMAHON
Alice's Idea, 2002
 Gelatin silver print and Text
 16 in. x 22.5 in.



We are staying at my mother's beach house for the month of August. Alice is fifteen and not really in the mood for the annual family vacation. One morning as everyone else is getting ready for the beach Alice pulls me aside and fixes me with her most urgent look. She has an idea but needs assistance to pull it off. I'm her best (and only) hope. "Mom, I want you to help me with something but you can't tell me that I can't do anything or ask a lot of questions." "Okay," I say. "What kinds of writing can you do?" she asks. "Well, I can write in script, print in all caps or upper and lower case, and do this sort of formal all caps lettering with serifs." "Show me," she says. I write samples on a piece of paper and she decides my writing is good enough. We go to the upstairs bedroom, which is small, airless and humid. It must be 100 degrees. She brings some markers and a notebook of her writing and tells me where she wants each one of the words and phrases to go: "Life" and "death" on the bottoms of her feet; "Something poisonous delicious forbidden" on her lower back; "I was dying but inside her I lived" on her stomach. She takes various poses and art directs me as I take the pictures (four rolls of film for the next couple of hours). For moments I detach enough to be utterly absorbed in my job but most of the time I alternate between feeling like she's taken me hostage and feeling like I've invaded her privacy in some way that a 'good mother' would never do. Somewhere there is another feeling that makes my chest ache that she would trust me enough to have me help her like this. We take a break and I see our reflection in the mirror, me at the edge of my maternal capacity and her on top of the world. I am holding the camera so I take the shot. Later that evening before dinner Alice is leaning proudly on the kitchen counter scantily dressed still in her body writing. The rest of the family is unusually quiet. My mother raises an eyebrow, shakes her head and bites her lip.

Metaphors & Myths: Women Videomakers on Motherhood

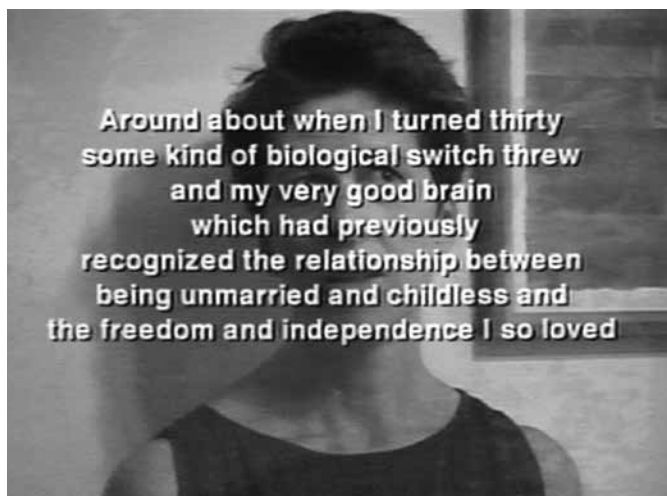
Karen vanMeenen

The shift in contemporary feminist art addressing the subject of motherhood has been from work that is more conceptual and effete toward work based in real life, in documentary practice, as the video work of Myrel Chernick, Rohesia Hamilton Metcalfe, Ellen McMahon, Shelly Silver and Beth Warshafsky demonstrates. For these videomakers, metaphor is both a linguistic tool and a visual mechanism. Their work in *Maternal Metaphors* conveys a variety of messages around the common theme of motherhood, deconstructing the cultural and artistic representations of the traditional (and stereotypical) “Madonna and Child.”

What these works also have in common is the use of a seemingly disjunctive structure to form a cohesive narrative and an intention, to varying degrees, to subvert traditional forms of documentary practice, to make connections between art making and other aspects of their lives. Documentary-based, fictional material in the form of myths and folktales figures prominently in many of the works, myth being not only an appropriate cultural allegory for specific character traits and

situations but also a signifier for the mythologized modern history of motherhood in general. This material takes many forms including the creating and relating of stories as in Chernick’s *Mommy Mommy* (1993-94, 25:00 minutes, exhibited here as an installation) where a boy and a girl tell rambling stories on camera that are contrasted to the narrator’s precise, reconstructed moral tale. The story of a girl being saved from an ogre by her mother is threaded through Silver’s *37 Stories About Leaving Home* (1996, 52:00 minutes). The challenges, conflicts and general ambivalence of mothering are also evident throughout the work. Hamilton Metcalfe, for example, allows her children to comment—on camera—about her parenting skills. Silver’s interviewees relate stories of mother-daughter estrangement and children being given away.

Hamilton Metcalfe’s *How Strong the Children* (1998, 28:00 minutes) is replete with the ironic redundancy inherent in the phrase “working mother.” Visually arresting with multi-layered and manipulated images, the multi-linear textual and voice-over narrative follows the artist as she struggles to



ROHESIA HAMILTON METCALFE, *How Strong the Children*, 1998



interview her two young daughters about motherhood. The girls resist, subjugating their mother, the artist, by mimicking her attitudes and revealing her conflicted relationship to motherhood. Hamilton Metcalfe's personal myths about the experience of having children are deconstructed by the children themselves, who continually defy her expectations. Instead of being an "adventurous" mother leading an "organic, in-sync" family, in which "everyone [is] stimulated...everyone [is] stimulating," Hamilton Metcalfe finds herself the "servant to this very small person" who bears the artist's own "freedom and independence-loving gene," referring to this twist of fate as a "biological indignity." We follow the discordant thread of Hamilton Metcalfe's experience of motherhood throughout the video, as her children offer that she could be a "better mother," that she gets "cranky" and should "stop working so hard." Although she experiences no revelation as a result of her search, the title of the piece tells us where she is going: the children are strong enough to do many things without her. She includes a litany of fairy tales that portray children without parents, stories that have a "safe and happy end," as she knows her own will.

In *37 Stories About Leaving Home* Silver interviews three generations of Japanese women about their experiences



of being a daughter and/or a mother. The piece begins with a short voiceover telling of a "dissatisfied daughter who was convinced she was living under an evil spell" so leaves her home in New York, but finds that the spell has followed her. She collects 37 small stones (in the land where she settled, Gods were to be found everywhere) to place in a crooked line (straight lines bring bad luck). Although this unfinished tale does not progress in the narrative beyond the introduction, here Silver is setting up a mythologized version of modern womanhood and creating a juncture within which the experience of women around the world can be related to that of the women of Tokyo she interviews.

37 Stories brings together several folktales, most prominently weaving in the story of a mother who journeys to save her daughter from the ogre Oni, who has snatched the girl away on her wedding day. They are ultimately saved by showing the monster and his friends their "important place," their genitals, the sight of which causes the monsters to laugh and spit out the river water they had drunk, allowing the two women to sail to safety. While the monsters scoff at this blatant representation of femaleness, it is this visual disclosure of the power of their womanhood that saves the women.

Visually rich with archival photographs and film footage, *37 Stories* gives voice to a century of women. The interviews are loosely linked as the women tell stories of their past and present, revealing complicated lives and relationships, as well as the differences between generations owing to a changing society. One daughter proclaims that she “decided never to sacrifice [herself]” as her mother has. Her grandmother claims that her life was planned for her, saying without a hint of bitterness, “My life just happened to me, children and all. Laughable, no?”

While *37 Stories* explores numerous ramifications of motherhood and involvement in the familial construct, from nursing an ill mother-in-law to estrangement to being raised by a geisha aunt, through the eyes of varied (if all twentieth-century Japanese) women, the other video works in *Maternal Metaphors* focus on more specific attitudes and perceptions. Myrel Chernick, in *She and I* (1995, 21:00 minutes), traces her grandparents’ emigration to Winnipeg, Canada, focusing on her paternal grandmother, Mirel, whom she never met. As a child, the narrator artist drew the various incarnations of her father’s family as it grew a generation before. With her father having only brothers, she invented a girl child, saying, “Only then was the family complete.” As Chernick follows the trail, using documentary footage and shots of her own daughter playing dress-up, she finds remnants of the life her grandmother led, tidbits of familial information. In her extensive texts, Chernick often shifts pronouns, transforming the autobiographical “I,” into the more universal “She.” In *She and I*, the subject shifts as Chernick blurs her own experience with her grandmother’s.

The most telling moment in the narrative is the revelation that a number of women in their seventies, when asked to be interviewed by the Jewish Historical Society, responded, “We didn’t do anything. We had wonderful lives, rewarding marriages, successful children. We have nothing to say.” Here women negate their own voices, while acknowledging that their lives fulfilled societal (and, by default, their own) conventions.

In *Mommy Mommy*, its video monitor placed on the chair used by the participants in the video, Chernick sets up

the dichotomy of a squirming, crying baby boy and a sedate baby girl, held on their mothers’ laps. Viewers are meant to experience two vastly disparate visceral reactions to the raucous screaming of the boy and the peaceful, nearly angelic countenance of the baby girl. Chernick scrolls large, watery text such as “can’t you make him stop?” across the screen, superseding viewers’ desire to demand just that. With subsequent use of such texts as “the child stole her voice,” the viewer’s response to the boy’s screaming is transformed into an intellectual exercise, forcing viewers to question their own constructs. We are told alternately that the agitated boy’s mother is a “bad mother,” while the peaceful baby girl’s mother is a “good mother” and a “hot mama.”

The universality of this “everymother” who is judged solely on the behavior of her child at a given moment is further exemplified by Chernick’s intentional framing of the shots to exclude the mothers’ heads and faces. In addition, as in Hamilton Metcalfe’s piece, the voice of the child usurps that of the mother. In *Mommy Mommy*, a young girl sits with her legs crossed and thumbs twiddling, with her baby doll in her lap. Using a factual adult tone, she says of her doll: “She’s asleep. I can do my things, and have a relaxing day.” In an ironic linguistic and visual twist that harkens back to the infanticide of Chernick’s *On the Table* and *On the Couch*, the girl then lifts her legs higher, obscuring the doll and smothering its face with her elbow, ending with the ominous statement, “I might as well make sure she doesn’t wake up again.”

In contrasting the mothers of the crying and silent babies, Chernick approaches the issue of semiotics, asking, “perhaps their differences were actually similarities of difference?” and “she couldn’t be the mother without the child, now, could she?” Chernick is being sly here, using the rhetoric of the assumed universal experience of motherhood to criticize cultural assumptions. The artist remains self-reflective, utilizing the third person “she” to acknowledge in scrolling text that “she was, again, leaving out the mother’s voice” and immediately returning to the voiceover relaying the reconstructed tale of

"The Powerful Lady," the story of a young princess who earns her heroine status, first by succeeding in domestic endeavors and later by wisely wielding the powers she has been given.

Chernick openly explores the ambiguities inherent in domestic life; she does not shy from portraying this life as monotonous, including such quotidian details as the boy's lengthy bout of crying in *Mommy Mommy* and the washing of a sink full of dishes presented in real time in *She and I*. She keeps a static camera, allowing the viewer to sit with the "action." What at first seems tedious for the viewer may be doubly so for the participant, but in the end the ultimate rewards of mothering are evident: the sparkling dishes are piled neatly on the sideboard.

In Ellen McMahon's epigrammatic *Scorpio is Bright* (2004, 1:45 minutes, see also the photo essay *Alice's Idea*, reprinted in this catalogue), a teenage girl asks her mother to transcribe texts onto her body and photograph them. The mother relates her mixed feelings about the process and the daughter recites the texts we witness her mother applying to her body, which range from considerations of her experience ("Maybe I was just being selfish") to personal maxims ("We can be free"). As she reproduces the words on the canvas of her daughter's body, the younger woman's voice is manifested

visibly in the physical world. Not only is the mother complicit in this powerful and culturally transgressive act of ownership, she also realizes something that "makes [her] chest ache": that her daughter trusts her enough to involve her in this intimate act. The viewer feels the closeness of their bond as the mother lovingly attends to her daughter's unusual request, and the result is a stunning panorama of text and flesh, McMahon's own familial fairytale made real.

In Beth Warshafsky's short work, *Regeneration* (1992, 2:00 minutes), photographic headshots of a mother and daughter are overlaid and slowly morphed into one another. As the speed at which each alternating image appears increases, the lines between the two physical realities become blurred. The emotional revelation that follows is that one cannot be sure which of the two one is seeing at any given moment, the resultant implication being that ultimately there is no difference in the eyes of the subjective outside world.

By transgressing societal expectations in these ways, these artists have implicated themselves in a subversion of human history itself. They have engaged in activities not sanctioned by their cultures, not the least of which is their ability to ultimately be both mothers and functioning artists, to succeed both maternally and metaphorically.



BETH WARSHAFSKY, *Regeneration*, 1992



SARAH E WEBB
Lament, 1999
Eggshells,
12 ft. wide X 8 ft. deep, detail

Lise refolds the newspaper on the train seat next to her. All week there has been bad news from the Line and nothing to do but wait for more. And then this morning the cable: “Come immediately. Esther dying.” It is a relief, oddly, to have this task, this errand Lise can accomplish. She has felt this at work too, engraving invitations. The rote gestures are soothing, the crisp letters satisfying. Even with the war upon them, people are having parties—weddings, anniversaries, Baptisms—and Lise is grateful for all these fetes, which seem to her neither foolish nor extravagant.

The train is slowing now and she reaches for the scuffed valise by her feet. It is nearly empty, just a blouse and fresh undergarments for the return trip and a bar of soap, which thuds inside her bag as the train lurches to a stop. She will fill the bag with the baby’s things—blankets, sweaters, smocks and bloomers—made by her sister-in-law. Lise has a memory of Esther sewing tiny, even stitches in the glow of a table lamp, her belly wide, her face flushed. Yves had looked on proudly from the settee, and Lise had tried hard not to feel her extraneousness then, her flat stomach, her empty, still hands. Silly to think of that now, she tells herself, rising. She hopes there are plenty of things for Eugenie because money is tight with her own husband at war. She doesn’t worry about how she will feed the baby, instead she imagines Eugenie’s floaty, dark curls, her solid warmth against her own chest.

This image pulls her through the crowd at the train station, through soldiers on the way

to the front, locked in embraces with girlfriends or wives, children waving and crying, the vendors selling sandwiches and beer, entire families dressed in holiday clothes, striped parasols in their arms. She has forgotten that Saint Malo is a holiday town, after all. She'd visited here as a school girl, walked the beach at low tide and then later watched the waves smacking the ramparts, completely covering where she had walked.

It is a perfect day for the beach, she sees, stepping outside. The sky is bright blue, streaked with wispy clouds. She finds a taxi easily, shows the driver the slip of paper with the address—72 rue Godard. She is unwilling to speak, to open herself to a conversation about the weather or the war, for that is all anybody seems to talk about any more. The cab bounces over narrow, cobblestone streets, past the reaching shadow of Cathedral St. Vincent, and halts before a stone apartment building.

“Merci,” Lise says, paying. She gathers her bag and steps out. She is thinking of another visit before Esther and Yves left Paris, and long before the men were called to fight. It seems like decades ago, but really it is only two years. When she had entered the apartment, she had found Yves filling a syringe, Esther waiting with her sleeve rolled up. She knew immediately what they were trying to do. Lise screamed and cried, begging them to stop. “Lise,” her brother had said, “surely you understand this is not a good time for a child.” But she had kept on until finally he flushed the fluid down the toilet. Esther had splashed water on her face, unrolled her sleeve. Perhaps she was relieved, too, but they never—any of them—spoke of that day again.

Today the curtains are drawn tight against the midday sun. Lise can't decide if she should ring the buzzer and finally she raps on the heavy door. It opens and the nurse squints out at her.

“She's resting now, Madame, but you can go in.”

“Thank you,” Lise says, setting down her bag with a clatter.

“Hush,” the nurse says. “The baby is sleeping and I can't have you waking her—it's impossible to get her down. She keeps calling for her mother.”

“Pardon me,” Lise says.

The nurse gestures towards the back of the apartment. “Go ahead,” she says, gathering her crocheting from her seat.

Esther is in a dark back bedroom. It smells like ammonia, Lise notes. The nurse has been efficient, if not gentle. The bookshelves by the bed are lined with vials, brown bottles stuffed with cotton and pills, tinctures and salves. There is a photograph of Yves in his uniform propped against the window. How will she recount all this for him? She must remember to tell him of the photograph, the nurse's attention to cleanliness—should she say there were flowers in a vase? A salty breeze from the ocean?

Esther is very still, her body like a child's, curled under a thin blanket. Her breathing is so shallow, that for a moment Lise thinks she is already gone. She settles on a chair and waits—for what? She wonders. In the silence it is hard not to think of all she likes to forget. In particular, her own inability to become pregnant, though Jean is relentless. He doesn't know about her past—the lover who left her, her clandestine abortion, or how she angered the doctor by saying “abortion” too loudly as she was wheeled away. “I could lose my position, you know,” he hissed and then she was out from the gas.

Esther's shrieks don't build in intensity; they simply begin loudly. Lise has goose bumps before she can

get to her feet.

"I don't want to die," Esther screams. "I don't want to die!"

Her grip on Lise's arm is strong—too strong for a woman who is dying, Lise finds herself thinking. Up close she notices Esther's clammy smell—yeasty, ripe, too sweet.

"It's okay," Lise says because she has to say something. "It's okay."

Esther's eyes narrow. She seems to know exactly to whom she is speaking. "Fool," she says. Her voice is muffled, as if she has eaten some cotton from the medicine jars. And then again more clearly: "Fool." She rolls over so Lise can see only her matted dark hair, her shoulders under her thin gown. Before Lise has finished feeling the slap of these words, she knows she will never tell anyone about this. What Esther has said hurts because it is true; she is foolish. But she is going to live, and Esther—smart, competent, lovely Esther—is dying before her eyes. She will be dead before Lise can forgive her.

Esther calls out for her mother who is far away in Latvia, whom Esther hasn't seen since she left at sixteen. Lise takes Esther's hand, strokes her forehead. It's Lise, she almost says, still stung, and then thinks better of it. "I'm here, my petite," she says, "I am here with you." We are children in the end, Lise thinks. Frightened, needy children.

When it is over, Lise calls in the nurse to record the time of death. As the nurse checks for a pulse, she clucks her tongue as if Esther hasn't had the good sense to go on living. "The pauvre," she says, and Lise wonders whom she means. Lise watches her move about the room, snapping open the shades and lifting windows. Lise takes Esther's best dress from the armoire. Yves has instructed her to buy a good coffin. After the war, he plans to move Esther to the Jewish cemetery in Paris, but after the war, he will be dead too, the Jewish cemetery vandalized beyond repair. Lise lays the navy crepe out on the foot of the bed, fingers the lacy inset by the neck.

From the next room, Lise hears the baby's lilting voice, her musical sounds which become words. "Maman, Maman, Maman," Eugenie sings, her voice growing louder and more purposeful. Lise enters the room. "Maman," Eugenie says and beams when she sees Lise, though Lise looks nothing like Esther. She is stout and fair and freckled, and will spend the rest of the war in Marseille, where everyone will think her a peasant from the North. "Maman," Eugenie says again, reaching up to Lise with dimpled arms.

This, Lise will tell Yves and Eugenie, when she is old enough, and anyone else who asks. As she bends to pick up Eugenie, Lise is crying. She has always wanted this baby, always thought that she was hers, and now she is. How horrible she feels, how glad.



MYREL CHERNICK, *Jenny, Lili and Untitled LED Display*, 1992
Digital print, 13 in. X 19 in.

Contributing Writers

Myrel Chernick is a multimedia artist who lives in New York. Her installations incorporate video, text, photography and sculptural objects and are shown nationally and internationally. Her most recent project is *Maternal Metaphors*.

Moyra Davey is an artist living in New York. Her book, *The Problem of Reading*, an essay with photographs, was published by Documents Books in July 2003. Her most recent work was on view in a one-person exhibit at American Fine Art Co. in November, 2003.

Rachel Hall's fiction has appeared in a number of literary journals including *Black Warrior Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *New Letters*, which awarded her their 2003 Fiction Prize. She has received honors and awards from *Litib*, *Nimrod*, *Glimmer Train*, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and the Saltonstall Foundation. She teaches creative writing and literature at the State University of New York-Geneseo where she holds the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Jennie Klein received her Ph.D. from the University of Southern California. She has published in *n.paradoxa*, *New Art Examiner*, *Art History*, *Art Papers*, and *Afterimage*. She recently completed editing a book of the writings of Linda Montano for Routledge and is curating an exhibition of the work of Barbara T. Smith. She has two children, presently aged four and six.

Dr. Andrea Liss is the Contemporary Art Historian/ Cultural Theorist at California State University San Marcos where her teaching focuses on feminist art and theory, photographic theory, and representations of memory and history. She has published *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), as well as numerous articles and exhibition catalogue essays. Her son Miles is now fourteen-years-old and her book *Bodies of Knowledge: Feminist Art and the Maternal* is forthcoming with University of Minnesota Press.

Karen vanMeenen is currently the Shorts Programmer for the High Falls Film Festival. She has served as a curator of video programs for the National Association for Artists' Organizations and as co-curator of the exhibition *The Female Gaze: Women Look at Men*. From 1998-2001, she was the Director of the Rochester International Film Festival. She writes on film and visual arts for *Art New England* and from 1993 to 2001 was editor of *Afterimage*, the Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism published by Visual Studies Workshop.

Works in the Exhibition

Monica Bock *Tooth for a Tooth*, 2004. Sterling silver and wood, 12 units. Installation dimensions variable.

Each shelf 1.75 in. h x 4.5 in. w x 2.5 in. d.

Each set of teeth approx. 1 in. h x 2 in. w x 2 in. d.

Myrel Chernick *Mommy Mommy*, 1994. *On the Table*, 1996.

Video installations with furniture and television sets.

Artists, Artwork, Mothers, Children, 1992-present.

Black and white digital prints, 10 units. 13 in. X 19 in.

She and I, 1995. Videotape, 21 minutes.

Renée Cox *Yo Mama at Home*, 1993. 85 in. X 49 in.

Yo Mama (The Sequel), 1995. 48 in. X 48 in. Gelatin silver

prints, ©Renée Cox. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Judy Gelles *Family Portrait*, 1977-1982. Black and white

framed Iris prints, 16 units. 17 in. X 21 in. each.

Judy Glantzman *Untitled*, 2003. *Untitled*, 2003. *Untitled*, 2004.

Untitled, 2004. Oil paint on canvas, each 80 in. X 70 in.

Robesia Hamilton Metcalfe *How Strong the Children*, 1998. Videotape, 28:00 minutes.

Mary Kelly *Primapara*, 1974; *Bathing Series*, 12 units,

Edition 1/3. *Manicure Pedicure Series*, 10 units, Edition 3/3.

Black and white gelatin silver prints on fiber-base paper.

Framed, 8.5 in. X 10.5 in. each. Marieluise Hessel Collection

on permanent loan to the Center for Curatorial Studies,

Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Ellen McMabon *Alice's Idea*, 2002. Gelatin silver print and text,

16 in. X 22.5. *Suckled*, 1996-present, 20 drawings. Charcoal on

Rives BFK, 20 in. X 13 in. each. *Love Objects*, 2000. Graphite on

found cards, 26 in. X 29 in. Photographed by Keith Schreiber.

Gail Rebban *Baby* diptychs, 2 units. 36 in. X 22 in. each. *Baby*

single prints, 2 units. 20 in. X 22 in. each. Gelatin silver prints.

M.R.I., 25 in. X 23 in. *Family Shield*, 25 in. X 25 in. *Jackson –*

Age 15, 21 in. X 25 in. *Jewish, Fantasy, Boot, Diversity, The*

Swimsuit Issue, and *The F Word*, each 11 in. X 14 in. Ink jet

prints. *Dorothy, Mother – Son Talk*, Artist's books.

Aura Rosenberg *Who Am I, what am I, where am I*, 1996-

1997. 5 C prints, 40 in. X 30 in. each. 10 C prints, 24 in. X 20 in. each.

Shelly Silver *37 Stories About Leaving Home*, 1996. Videotape, 52:00 minutes.

Beth Warshafsky *Regeneration*, 1992. Videotape, 2:00 minutes.

Sarah Webb *milk and tears*, 2001. Birdseye weave cloth
diapers, thread. 25 running feet installed.

Marion Wilson *The Artificer's Twin, Blushing Yaks*,

The Grand Thaumaturge, 2003. Bronze with patina, each

24 in. X 8 in. X 8 in. *Guns for Newborns*, 1998.

Bronze, cast water guns, 5 in. X 24 in. X 4 in.

