



HDK-VALAND – ACADEMY OF ART AND DESIGN

# Frankenstein's Mother

Mapping structures, and researching ways of creating new ones, within the interrelated entanglement of artistic practice and motherhood

Author:	Clara Aldén
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Supervisor:	Ann-Charlotte Glasberg Blomqvist
Examiner:	Viviana Checchia

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This essay does not care that I did not get enough (any) sleep last night, or that I constantly worry about how we are going to pay our rent next month. It does not know that I spend hours every week daydreaming about how life would be if I just lost some weight, and it does not matter to the text that the body that is giving birth to it aches and hurts a lot from carrying children around, sleeping in a z shape at night or spending too much time in front of the computer. On the other hand, my body does not seem to grasp the fact that there are books (articles, journals) that need to be read, concepts that need to be sought through, and essays that need to be written. The body cares about hunger, aches, and tiredness.

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## Introduction

American artist Judy Chicago once told another artist, Helen Million Ruby, that she had to choose between her children and artistic practice.<sup>1</sup> When asked about this, she commented that she was not giving an ultimatum but merely stating a fact.<sup>2</sup> In the foreword to the book *The Post-Partum Document*, Lucy Lippard noted that British artist Mary Kelly was “the first woman in the art world who let it be known she had a child. The rest of them kept it hidden.”<sup>3</sup> These two anecdotes are from the 1970s, and the situation in which the entanglement of my artistic practice and maternity differs from theirs, but it is still complicated and sometimes conflicting. My maternity and artistic practice are deeply intertwined and dependent on each other. They were conceived at the same moment, and they feed off and influence each other. They are simultaneously intertwined and separate in the same way a mother and her child can be. I use my artistic practice to process and reconsider different aspects of motherhood. By doing so, I hope to offer additional readings to add to this container. Simultaneously, the knowledge produced by my experiences of motherhood is the origin and raw material on which I base my artistic practice.

This essay aims to research different feminist strategies to approach this interrelated entanglement of motherhood and artistic practice. Situated within the thematic framework of the *maternal turn*, I wish to explore the possibilities of regarding motherhood as artistic practice. The maternal turn is described by professor in contemporary art and theory, Natalie Loveless, as:

“[...]marked by new social media networks, curatorial projects, and recent and upcoming publications that argue for the maternal as a crucial location from which to explore the conditions, ethics, and futures of feminism today.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein, eds., *The M-Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, Bradford, Demeter Press, 2011, p.2

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Lippard, Foreword to *Post-Partum Document*, by Mary Kelly, London, Routledge & Kagan Paul, 1983, xi-xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Natalie Loveless, “Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein Eds, *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2011), 427 Pp., ISBN: 978-0986667121, \$49.95, Paperback.”, *Studies in the Maternal*, 2013, p.1-6.

I will discuss maternal artworks of four artists, Catherine Opie, Sanna Lemken, Mary Kelly, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. What different strategies and methods are employed within their works, and how do these strategies operate within the fields of motherhood and art? They have all engaged with the mother/artist entanglement and used their artistic practice to question both the institution of motherhood and the hegemonies within art, but their approaches differ.

When I discuss motherhood, which I will throughout this essay from several different angles, I speak about it as a practice and not a state of being. Similarly, this practice is, in this text, not regarded as limited by biological bounds. Feminist theory and history of science professor Donna Haraway propose that we should “Make Kin Not Babies!”<sup>5</sup> By this, she argues that disconnecting kinship from biological parenthood is crucial to enable an overture to extend the concept of kinmaking outside of the limits of Western family apparatuses. Haraway proposes that we use the words kinnovations, and clanarchy when discussing unconventional parenting.<sup>6</sup> Originally proposed by Lizzie Skurnick, *Kinnovator* is a word for a person who creates families in unconventional ways.<sup>7</sup> The word *clanarchist* refers to a person who refuses traditional definitions of family.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Experimental Futures: Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, p.102.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 208.

<sup>7</sup> Lizzie Skurnick and Janne Iivonen, *That Should Be a Word: A Language Lover's Guide to Choregasms, Povertunity, Brattling, and 250 Other Much-Needed Terms for the Modern World*, New York, Workman Publishing, 2015, p.8

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.10.

## The mind thinks through the body

In the introduction to the anthology *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith articulate that there has been “surprisingly little written about pregnancy from a philosophical and phenomenological angle.”<sup>9</sup> They describe pregnancy as an experience that hovers between being a concern limited to pregnant subjects and being a general concern.<sup>10</sup> This duality is explained by the duplicity in that the experience in one sense can only be experienced first hand by the ones who go through pregnancies. On the other hand, being born is inevitably an experience shared by all human beings.<sup>11</sup> The same dualism of particularity and universality could be said about the experience of motherhood. Finnish philosopher Johanna Oksala speaks about the critical role that feminist phenomenology and theory play in acknowledging and exploring the ways in which philosophy has been “affected by masculine assumptions.”<sup>12</sup> These texts facilitate the possibility of regarding the perspective of the pregnant subject unique, in the sense that the pregnant person is a “two-in-one-body.”<sup>13</sup> American professor of political science, Iris Marion Young, refers to the pregnant subject as “decentered, split, or doubled in several ways.”<sup>14</sup> She describes the bodily experience of pregnancy as something that belongs to the body of the pregnant and another simultaneously. I recognize this sensation of a decentered subjectivity and would like to assert that this sensation does not end when pregnancy does, but continues, lingers on as a crucial part of motherhood.

The intensity of my maternal experiences increased the gap between embodied knowledge and theory within my own life, and when I discovered autotheory, I realized it might be useful in bridging this gap. The relatively newborn term *autotheory* is a method of using “[...] one’s

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<sup>9</sup> Jonna Bornemark and Nicholas Smith, “Introduction” *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, Huddinge, Södertörns högskola, 2016, p.7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.8. ; Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Burke & Gill, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993, p.5.

<sup>12</sup> Johanna Oksala, “What is feminist phenomenology? Thinking birth philosophically”, *Radical Philosophy* 126, Radical Philosophy Group, United Kingdom, 2004, p.26.

<sup>13</sup> Joan Raphael-Leff, “Two-in-One-Body”: Unconscious Representations and Ethical Dimensions of Inter-Corporeality in Childbearing”, *Phenomenology of Pregnancy*, Huddinge, Södertörns högskola, 2016, p.157.

<sup>14</sup> Iris Marion Young, Pregnant embodiment: subjectivity and alienation, *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy: A Forum for Bioethics and Philosophy of Medicine*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 1984, p.45–62

embodied experiences as a primary text or raw material through which to theorize, process, and reiterate theory to feminist effects.”<sup>15</sup> In the past few years, the term has emerged in relation to third and fourth-wave feminist works such as writers Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, Paul B Preciado’s *Testo Junkie*, or artist Carolyn Lazard’s *In sickness and Study*.<sup>16</sup> It has also been used as a tool to rethink older feminist work such as Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick*, which has been subsequently recharacterized as autotheoretical, though written before the terminology existed.<sup>17</sup> Although the term autotheory is fairly new, autobiographicality and subjective knowledge are deeply embedded in feminist history. In 1977, Helene Cixous wrote, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

“[...]Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into her own movement.”<sup>18</sup>

Cixous is, in this text, pointing towards the importance of subjectivity without using that specific terminology. Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges offers an addition to the reading of the significance of subjectivity. In *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, Haraway speaks about the issue of presumed objectivity present within scientific research.<sup>19</sup> She questions scientific claims of having the ability to “see but not be seen, to represent while escap[ing] representation.”<sup>20</sup> Haraway states that objectivity in the sense of being neutral is impossible. By claiming that all knowledge production is connected to the specific conditions in which it is produced, she argues for *situated knowledges*, where perspective remains visible and accountable. The concept was conceived in the United States in

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<sup>15</sup> Lauren Fournier, ‘Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice’, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 33, no. 3, 2018, p.643–62.

<sup>16</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2016;

Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, New York : The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013 ;

Carolyn Lazard, *In Sickness and Study*, [digital photography series (site-specific installation on Instagram)] <http://www.carolynlazard.com/in-sickness-and-study> (accessed 2020-12-09)

<sup>17</sup> Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*, New York, N.Y: Semiotext(e), 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, (translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen), *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol.1, no. 4, 1976, p.875–93.

<sup>19</sup> Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, vol.14, no. 3, 1988.

<sup>20</sup> Haraway, p. 581

the late 1980s as a specific critique directed towards the “unmarked positions of Man and White.”<sup>21</sup> However, it also functions as a tool used to deconstruct truth claims in general by revealing their situatedness. In my artistic practice, I use this tool of situated knowledge to uncover and research the origin of structures present within my everyday life and to motivate the use and increase the value of the embodied knowledge produced by my maternal experiences.

Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) is a work that examines subjectivity within the mother and child dyad. It is a six-part (I-VI) installation consisting of baby clothes, dirty diaper liners, plaster casts, drawings, notes, found objects, and graphs (among others). The collected material documents her son’s development from infancy until the age of 6, as he enters into language and society.<sup>22</sup> Even though the work is closely related to and derived from her personal experiences of mothering, Kelly refuses to name it autobiographical;

“Although it is a self documentation of the mother-child relationship (myself and my son), the *Post-Partum Document* does not describe the unified, transcendental subject of autobiography but rather, the decentered, socially constituted subject of a mutual discourse.”<sup>23</sup>

The *Post-Partum Document* grew out of the theoretical and practical practice of the current women’s movement in general, and specifically, it identified with current debates and thoughts around Lacanian readings of Freud in connection to feminism. Kelly’s motivation for initiating the project grew out of a collective sense of political urgency. Many women, including herself, were mothers, and even though their motherhood determined their lives, they were unable to find subjective representations of the mother-child relationship.<sup>24</sup> Though commonly represented throughout art history, the relationship of mother and child was consistently depicted from the observer’s perspective. The work was produced within a British context during the 1970s, and the cultural production relating to the topic of motherhood spans over a more extensive scale

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The graphs and charts that accompany the found objects are closely related to and inspired by the theories of French psychoanalysis and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Kelly, ‘Notes on Reading the *Post-Partum Document*’, *Conceptual Art : A Critical Anthology*, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1999, p.370-374.

<sup>24</sup> Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein, eds., *The M-Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2011, p.22



today. However, I believe that the different contemporary models of maternity are still too few, narrow, and associated with patriarchal structures. I interpret Kelly's refusal of autobiography as an insistence for the work, and the experiences and knowledges it distributes, to be acknowledged as epistemologically important. Through the documentation of a mother's effort to enable a child's socialization process and inauguration into society, the work adds a crucial perspective of the maternal role in creating subjectivity that Kelly thought absent within philosophy, psychology, and conceptual art at the time.<sup>25</sup> I regard the Post-partum Document as an early autotheoretical work of art; it possesses all the qualities that define autotheory.

What does autotheory actually *do* then? What effects does the method have? According to Fournier, it uses first-person, subjective experiences to

“[...]process, perform, enact, iterate and wrestle with the hegemonic discourses of “theory” and philosophy, extending the feminist practice of theorizing from one's subject positioning as a way of engendering insights into questions related to esthetics, politics, ethics, and social and cultural theory.”<sup>26</sup>

The theorizing is conducted through the raw material of the embodied, subjective experiences – but at the same time, it reinforces theory as the discourse through which to consider one's experiences. An argument against autotheory could be that it devalues the embodied experience in itself. Does the embodied experience really need to be connected to theory (and often theory conceived by men) to be taken *seriously*? One could argue that the experiences are *enough* by themselves. Using American feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad's thoughts of the linguistic representation of matter and applying them to embodied knowledge and the lived experience could be helpful in making such a claim. In her text *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*, Barad describes language and culture as possessing or being granted qualities of agency and historicity within epistemology that matter does not.<sup>27</sup> She questions the presumed ability of language to represent and reflect matter by using a performative understanding of the representational belief:

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 21

<sup>26</sup> Fournier, 'Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory', p.658.

<sup>27</sup> Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol.28, no. 3, 2003, p.801–31.

“Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real.”<sup>28</sup>

Performativity is here understood as a concept that contests the power of prevailing language to represent matter, rather than consolidating language as the structure on which we construct our understanding of the world. In the text *Notes on reading the Post-partum document* Mary Kelly comes to similar conclusions about the duality of connecting embodied, or as she refers to it, lived experience, and theory:

“The *Document* reiterates, at one level, the unique contribution that consciousness-raising made to political practice in general by emphasizing the subjective moment of women’s oppression. But, at another level, it argues against the supposed self-sufficiency of lived experience and for a theoretical elaboration of the social relations in which femininity is formed.”<sup>29</sup>

I regard autotheory as a method working in two trajectories simultaneously; by connecting embodied experiences to theory, it provides them (the experiences) with an epistemological value (that it presumably have not been granted before). Autotheory might also be used in order to enforce the scientific and epistemological value in experiences that previously might not have been regarded as such.

Within my artistic practice, autotheory functions as a method to reevaluate and reiterate experiences and actions connected to motherhood. This approach emerged as a survival strategy and a method of coping with the seemingly endless and tedious chores connected to maintaining a household and taking care of children. Regarding these chores and everyday actions through a lens of theory facilitates possibilities of alternative experiences.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.802

<sup>29</sup> Kelly, ‘Notes on Reading the Post-Partum Document’, p.371.



Almost everyday, like clockwork, I am woken up at 5.45 by my sons. After spending some time waking up, cuddling, bed wrestling, we all arise to start our day. I feel nauseous when dealing with food early in the morning, so I usually hide in the bathroom while my partner makes breakfast.<sup>30</sup> Pretending to get ready but really I just use it as an excuse to run away from my maternal duties for a second.<sup>31</sup> I look at my reflection in the mirror and my mother, the version of her that existed in my childhood, stares back at me. I bring my hairbrush out to the living room and detangle my eldest son's hair while he watches television.<sup>32</sup> A jolt of anxiety hits me when I realize exactly how much television they've watched lately as I've been busy writing this essay. My cat signals to me that she's hungry, so I feed her.<sup>33</sup> I water the plants. I sweep the floor of our kitchen.<sup>34</sup> The daily cycle has begun.



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<sup>30</sup> "Edible material is an agent inside and alongside intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity-wielding, culture-making human beings. Food is an active inducer-producer of salient, public effects, rather than a passive resource at the disposal of consumers.", Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010. p.39.

<sup>31</sup> "Unexamined assumptions: First, that a "natural" mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs [...] I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is "unconditional"; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity.", Adrienne C. Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Reissued ed, Women's Studies, New York: Norton, 1995, p.22-23.

<sup>32</sup> "Workers, machines, managers are entangled phenomena, relational beings, that share more than the air around them; they help constitute one another", Barad, *Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, p.239.

<sup>33</sup> "How would we sort things out? Canid, hominid; pet, professor; bitch, woman, animal, human; athlete, handler. One of us has a microchip injected under her neck skin for identification; the other has a photo ID California drivers license. One of us has a written record of her ancestors for twenty generations; one of us does not know her great grandparents' names. One of us, product of a vast genetic mixture, is called "pure- bred." One of us, equally product of a vast mixture, is called "white." Each of these names designates a racial discourse, and we both inherit their consequences in our flesh." Haraway, "The companion species manifesto: dogs, people, and significant otherness", Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003, p.1-2.

<sup>34</sup> "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.", Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Repr, London, Routledge, 2001, p.2.

### The body interrupts the mind

One of my artistic practice's main focuses is to research and challenge structures present within the current models of motherhood. In her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich describes a distinction between two meanings of motherhood where one is superimposed on the other: the *institution of motherhood*, which is based on a patriarchal structure, and *feminist motherhood* that allows all mothers to define their own maternal experiences.<sup>35</sup> The concept and ideals of motherhood have changed throughout history and vary between cultures. However, I still regard Rich's ideas concerning the institution of motherhood as relevant within a contemporary context. The structure of the institution might change over time, but the institution remains. I would like to argue that maternal artworks might be useful in exploring and challenging this institution.

American artist Catherine Opie's work mostly revolves around notions of communal, sexual, and cultural identity.<sup>36</sup> In the 1990s, she created the *Portrait* series in which she photographed people from the queer community in San Francisco in the style of formal, traditional portraiture. This approach of using "historical norms of studio portraiture [to] upend heterosexual norms of identity and sexuality" is used again in her photographic series of self-portraits, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993), *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994), and *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004).<sup>37</sup> In addition, her self-portraiture is used as a marker and reminder that she, as the artist, does not stand apart from the groups she documents in her other works.<sup>38</sup> In her work *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004), Opie is depicted in a style and composition similar to the iconography of a Madonna and child. She is sitting down, holding her baby in her arms while he is breastfeeding. They stare into each other's eyes. This image is in one way fulfilling all the conventions of the iconography of motherhood, apart from one thing: the mother depicted in the image does not look like a conventional mother.

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<sup>35</sup> Adrienne C. Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Reissued ed, Women's Studies, New York: Norton, 1995. p.13

<sup>36</sup> The Solomon R Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, 'Catherine Opie : Self-Portrait/Cutting', (website), <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/30354> (accessed Nov. 28, 2020)

<sup>37</sup> Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* [chromogenic print], 1993 ; Opie, *Self-Portrait/Pervert* [chromogenic print], 1994 ; Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing* [chromogenic print], 2004

<sup>38</sup> The Solomon R Guggenheim Museums and Foundation, *ibid.*

She describes it “I am not a young Madonna and child. I’m a 40-year-old woman with a double chin and wrinkles, nursing my child.”<sup>39</sup> There are other marks on her body: her tattoos, hairy armpits, and most of all, the scars from her previous work *Self-Portrait/Pervert* spelling out the word *Pervert* across her chest that signal unconventionality. She is depicting herself as a mother, which she is, and mimics a conventional maternal tradition model to which she does not belong. The artwork challenges the iconography of conventional expectations of motherhood in itself, but the work also functions as a documentation of the *kinnovations* the artist herself has made by making a family and becoming a mother in an unconventional way. Opie creates a self portrait in a staged manner, posing in a way that goes in line with maternal iconography. By appropriating a conventional, traditional maternal iconography she highlights how she is unable to fit into it, but that she is in fact as much of a mother than anyone else anyway. I also read this work as a documentation of the possible struggle of a kinnovator or a clanarchist, of one who practices motherhood in unconventional ways.

The short film *Konstnären får barn* (2018) by Swedish director Sanna Lenken documents another maternal struggle: the one of the artist who is unable to produce art due to the fact that she is conducting another sort of labor: the reproductive one.<sup>40</sup> In the video, documentary footage from the director’s maternity leave is accompanied by a voice-over that recites quotes from different male, Swedish artists, directors, and authors where they speak about their artistic processes. The notion of the artist as a (male) genius that requires solitude and favors work above everything else in order to create masterpieces stands in contrast to the artist, who is also a mother. The male voices are sometimes interrupted by a female voice that speaks about different maternal experiences. Desires of drinking and “[...]going caramba”, feelings of losing oneself both mentally and physically are mixed with different tips commonly directed towards mothers on things such as kegel exercises.<sup>41</sup> I consider this artwork to function as a challenge on both the (outdated but still existing) notion of the artist-as-genius and as the mother as an (also outdated,

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<sup>39</sup> Catherine Opie, "A Evening with Catherine Opie" (presentation at Out at the Center Series, the Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgendered Community Center, New York City, New York, March 2009), [gaycenter.org/out](http://gaycenter.org/out), cited in Laura Allred Hurtado, *Motherhood and Representation at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Judy Chicago, Catherine Opie, Canan Senol*, Utah, The University of Utah, 2011, p.28

<sup>40</sup> Sanna Lenken, *Konstnären får barn [Streamed video]*, Tangy AB, Stockholm, 2018, <https://www.svtplay.se/video/18795270/konstnaren-far-barn> (accessed Dec. 9, 2020)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

but still prevailing) notion of the mother as “all-loving, all-forgiving, and all-sacrificing.”<sup>42</sup> The video describes an artist that has the feeling of (temporarily) losing the ability to produce art because of her maternity, but by describing this, she has turned the situation itself into an artwork.

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Every time the kids cascade through our front door I run against them yelling “STOP RIGHT THERE” trying to keep them from going too far before I manage to get their shoes off. I always fail. What can this repeated routine of trying to stop these dirty projectiles on their trajectory towards objects intended to stay unpolluted tell me about the context in which I am trying to situate and identify myself as a mother? What underlying forces act as catalysts for my motivation to keep up with this struggle?

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<sup>42</sup> Andrea Liss, “Maternal Aesthetics: The Surprise of the Real”, *Studies in the Maternal*, vol.5, no.1, 2013.

## Life makes a mess

The never-ending circular motion of bodies getting dirty and then bathed, clothes getting stained and then washed, the living room floor filled with toys which are then picked up again, just to be thrown all over the place once more within an hour caused me to initiate my work *Dirt and Dignity* (2020). The project, which consists of several sculptural objects and one video work, emerged out of my mere desperation to try to find additional purpose in this endless maintenance dance. In the project, I use processes of pollution in order to produce sculptural objects. This act of letting pollution become part of an artistic method is used to visualize hierarchical differences between different sorts of production and mark-making. Playground sand collected from my children's sneakers, a stained table cloth, and cut-outs of stains left on a plastic floor mat are examples of materials and processes used in the project. The artistic process of the *Dirt and Dignity* project enable me to regard situations and actions, previously thought of as necessary but dreary and uninspiring, as philosophically and intellectually interesting. The method of autotheory is used throughout the artistic process to research and regard these mundane situations through a theoretical and philosophical lens. The esthetic choices are then informed by different sets of theory relating to the specific derivative action or situation. The sculptural objects are placed back into the situation from which they derive where they are activated in different ways by the different inhabitants of the apartment. The cat scratches her claws against one object, and falls asleep on top of another, the children use them in their play. And I move them around and clean them, an ouroboros is created. The intention with the project is to create new paths, both mental; can this project change how I think and feel about a certain situation or action?, and physical; can these objects change the movement and behaviour of the inhabitants of this home?. The project is an investigation into the ability of matter and mind to affect each other. In the associated autotheoretical video work, also entitled *Dirt and dignity* (2020), a single-shot video pans over a very messy apartment. A voice-over recites a text constructed from excerpts from the book *Purity and Danger* by British anthropologist Mary Douglas.<sup>43</sup> In the book, Douglas sets out to examine what is considered unclean in different cultures. To do so, she closely investigates "...the ordered pattering which that culture strives to establish".<sup>44</sup> She defines

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Repr, London, Routledge, 2001.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p.

dirt as the by-product that gets left outside of the systematic ordering and classification of matter within the particular culture in question.

“Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.”<sup>45</sup>

Douglas writes about societal structures around cleanliness, but she also speaks about how rituals of different kinds recognize the potential of disorder.<sup>46</sup> The disorder forces us to walk new paths, to wander into the unknown forest of our minds. The same can be said about the messiness of motherhood.

American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles created the *Maintenance Art Manifesto* in 1969 as both an exhibition proposal and a manifesto for her artistic practice in general.<sup>47</sup> The idea she proposes within the manifesto is to conduct everyday maintenance actions and exhibit them as art. Within the first part of the manifesto, Laderman Ukeles presents a paradox between what she refers to as the *death instinct* and the *life instinct*.<sup>48</sup> The death instinct consists of concepts such as separation, individuality, and the genius artist following *his* path to death. In contrast, the life instinct includes concepts such as unification, perpetuation, and maintenance of the species. She continues to use the concept of two opposing systems when describing the process of (artistic) production in terms of *development* and *maintenance*.<sup>49</sup> Development systems are described as “...partial feedback systems with major room for change”, containing concepts of pure individual creation, progress, change, and excitement.<sup>50</sup> The category of maintenance systems is

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<sup>45</sup> Douglas, p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p. 95.

<sup>47</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969! Proposal for an Exhibition “CARE””, *Journal of Contemporary Painting*, vol 4, no. 2, 2018, p.233–37.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p.234.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p.235.



characterized as a “...feedback system with little room for alteration”, consisting of concepts of preservation, defense, and sustainability.<sup>51</sup> Through these different categories, Laderman Ukeles speaks about the often invisible maintenance work conducted to sustain the artworks after the point of production and, in addition, the maintenance work conducted to sustain the health of the producers (the artists) and their possible children in order for them to be able to produce. The manifesto refers to the 1970s, avant-garde, conceptual, and process art as infected by strains of maintenance-ideas and employing maintenance processes even though it claims to be performing “pure development.”<sup>52</sup> Laderman Ukeles developed the concept of maintenance art because she experienced an irreconcilable dualism between being a mother and being an artist.<sup>53</sup> The prevailing artistic mandate of the time, embodied for Laderman Ukeles by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Jackson Pollock, conflicted with the ethics and reality of motherhood.<sup>54</sup> By presenting maintenance actions as art, she exposes the separation between production and maintenance and merges the maternal and the artistic. The first realizations of artworks connected to the manifesto were situated within the daily life of the artist.

In the work entitled *Maintenance Art: Personal Time Studies* (1973), she systematically recorded her everyday actions in her role as a housewife, mother, and artist in a written log.<sup>55</sup> In this log, her attempts to find time to conduct artistic work between the constant demands of childcare are visible. In the work *Dressing To Go Out/ Undressing To Come In* (1973), the written log has been converted into images that document the effort needed to prepare her children to go in and out of their apartment during winter.<sup>56</sup> In the summer of 1973, Ukeles performed three different choreographed actions at the Wadsworth Museum in Connecticut.<sup>57</sup> In *Transfer: The Maintenance Of The Art Object* (1973), Ukeles cleans the most popular object of the museum, an Egyptian mummy. The dead body has, through the canonical filter of culture, risen from refuse into art.<sup>58</sup> Through the performed three-part act, which involved both the artist, a trained

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Elena Tavecchia, ‘Mierle Laderman Ukeles “Maintenance Art” at Queens Museum, New York’, *Mousse Magazine* (blog), 2017, <http://moussemagazine.it/mierle-laderman-ukeles-maintenance-art-queens-museum-new-york/> (accessed Nov.11, 2020)

<sup>54</sup> Sherry Buckberrough, Andrea Miller-Keller, “Mierle Laderman Ukeles/ Matrix 137” (Exhibition catalogue), Hartford, The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 1998, p.2-3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

maintenance worker, and a conservator, the maintenance necessary for conserving the valuable object becomes visible and validated. In *The Keeping Of The Keys* (1973), Ukeles demonstrated the security staff's responsibility and power by merely going around locking and unlocking different doors, both within public and administrative parts of the museum building.<sup>59</sup> The two endurance art actions, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973) and *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside* (1973), consisted of the artist washing the stairs outside the building and a marble floor inside. To conduct these performative ablutions, she used cloth diapers. These diapers were commonly used by both mothers (to clean with and use as nappies) and by conservators to clean works of art. After the performances, the diapers were dated and stamped "Maintenance Art Original".<sup>60</sup>

The *Dirt and Dignity* project relates to Ukeles works in several different ways. Both practices were conceived out of the frustrating dilemma of time consuming motherhood and artistic ambitions. Both practices attempt to recognize or visualise the fact that there are similarities between artistic practice and other types of manual labor. In her *Maintenance Art Manifesto*, Ukeles talks about conceptual, and process art employing maintenance processes as artistic processes without acknowledging to do so.<sup>61</sup> While Laderman Ukeles in her different projects tends to point towards the maintenance *act*, I, in my *Dirt and Dignity* project, rather attempt to use pollution processes to create sculptural objects. Ukeles highlights the importance of maintenance by *performing* maintenance. By pointing at the similarities between artistic processes within conceptual and process art and maintenance, she offers the possibility of hierarchical alterations. The *Dirt and Dignity* project attempts to achieve similar alterations within hierarchy by pointing towards the act of mark-making present within both pollution and artistic practice. While the *Dirt and Dignity* project is exclusively situated within the private home, Ukeles different projects stretch over a larger societal scope. By conducting her artistic maintenance practices in her own home, at art institutions, and then later, in her ambitious long term collaboration with the New York City Department of Sanitation, she highlights the importance of maintenance: for the human body and the societal body alike.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Laderman Ukeles, p.233–37.

## Conclusion

Women were not always welcomed into the art scene. Mothers have not always been welcomed into the feminist movement. There are aspects of motherhood that might make it harder to conduct artistic practice. Having children is expensive; you lose sleep, you worry. Children have needs, urges, wishes, and moods, and part of their survival instinct is to ignore the needs of their parents and demand their immediate attention.

This essay has discussed different feminist strategies that can be utilized in managing this sometimes conflicting, sometimes symbiotic relationship of motherhood and artistic practice. With the help of maternal artworks by Catherine Opie, Sanna Lemken, Mary Kelly, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, I am in this essay proposing *motherhood as artistic practice*. This approach is supposed to function as a tool to offer new perspectives of existing structures and concepts, and researching ways of creating new ones. I base this proposition on the fact that I detect many similarities between maternity and artistic practice, and consider the maternal perspective an useful point of view within different sorts of knowledge production and artistic practice. Johanna Oksalas thoughts on the importance of feminist phenomenology and Iris Marion Youngs thoughts on the pregnant subject as split or doubled are used in this text to support the view of the maternal perspective as useful and unique.

In the last pages of her text *Situated Knowledges*, Donna Haraway speaks about *the apparatus of bodily production*, a term which is used to emphasize the importance of the “production and reproduction - of bodies and other objects of value in scientific knowledge projects”.<sup>62</sup> The bodies (and other organic material) are not to be thought of as raw material for science but are to be regarded as an active producer of knowledge. She proposes the concept of a *material-semiotic actor* in an attempt to bring “facticity” and “the organic” into a “cumbersome entity”.<sup>63</sup> This concept of a *material-semiotic actor* can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between material/body/lived experience, and theory discussed in this essay.

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<sup>62</sup> Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3, 1988, p.595.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

When introducing her concept of a material-semiotic actor in *Situated Knowledges*, Donna Haraway speaks about similarities of biological and artistic production;

“Are biological bodies “produced” or “generated” in the same strong sense as poems? From the early stirrings of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, many poets and biologists have believed that poetry and organisms are siblings. Frankenstein may be read as a meditation on this proposition. I continue to believe in this potent proposition but in a postmodern and not a Romantic manner.”<sup>64</sup>

This quote points towards another theme in this essay, the production, and reproduction present within both childbirth and artistic practice. If a poem and an organism can be siblings, then a body might be produced in the same way as a poem - and a poem might be born just like a body. My ambition is that my artistic practice and motherhood will develop simultaneously, just like the body of the monster, and the story does in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. My wish is for them to form an unruly alliance where both tropes develop with the support of the other.

Another important aspect of this essay revolves around the potential of the maternal turn of highlighting and reiterating structures within both motherhood and knowledge production. One way of changing the rules of the systems in which we operate might be to pollute them, in the sense Mary Douglas speaks about pollution or disorder. She describes disorder as crucial when creating new structures:

“Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern.[...] So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite.”<sup>65</sup>

Instead of accepting dirt to be matter out of place we might shift our gaze and reconsider the ruleset of the structures we use when deciding what is dirt, what is art, and how a mother should behave.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.p. 95

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