MOTHERHOOD IN THE ART WORLD
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To Alma, for being all the meaning

Vienna, 2015
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I. Motherhood Revisited</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise Bourgeois</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VALIE EXPORT</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hackney Flashers</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Hiller</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mako Idemitsu</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten Justesen</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina Keane</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Kelly</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friedl Kubelka vom Gröller</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MieL Laderman Ukeles</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lea Lublin</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>María Evelia Marmolejo</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feministo</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fina Miralles</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Art</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ree Morton</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Mulvey</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Oppermann</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina Pane</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewa Partum</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine Reichek</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ursula Reuter Christiansen</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The need to discuss the subject of motherhood in the art world has not ceased since 1960. As artist Mimi Smith declares, 

At the end of the decade of 1960 it was hard for women to be taken seriously as artists. It was harder for a woman who was married and had children. Worst of all was to make work about it! It is still very difficult for women artists today if they have children and use them as subject matter in their work, maybe harder than it has ever been.1

On the other hand the topic seem more vivid than ever as the artist Tracey Emin produces a great scandal when at the end of 2014 declares that “there are good artists that have children. Of course there are. They are called men.”2

The current research has emerged from this scenario and counts with a strong personal inquiring component as I am myself an artist new to motherhood: How did the first “mother artists” deal with motherhood? How were their questions and reassurances represented? How has the reception of artworks depicting motherhood changed throughout time? What role has motherhood played in the course of the art market? Can this thus be read as a symptom of the economic system that contains it, Post-Fordism? And is it the same everywhere?

We have decided to call these artists “mother artists” aware of the term’s problematics, as the word “mother” has been rejected from artists who have children because in the western cultures it has widely accompanied the inscription to tradition and patriarchy, being an immediate synonym of women’s reduction to their role of mothers; as well as motherhood has counted with a negative meaning as described in the film “Animal Mother - Human Mother”(1998) of Helke Sander. In Germany, for instance, motherhood was a vital part of the Nazi propaganda, and even during the sixties and seventies the word “mother” was immediately associated with the fascist ideology, becoming this way a taboo.

In the following text we will pinpoint artworks produced for artists who are mothers and who defy through their work, as well as in their personal lives, the norms of patriarchal motherhood, as well as patriarchal art. These bodies of works have challenged the norms that are still limiting and oppressing to women.

Our perspective strongly considers Andrea O’Reilly’s ideas on carework -the work that mothers do-, as a practice that must be recognized as foundational to our political and personal well-being.3

Our aim is to review the foundation of the feminist movement emerged during the 1960s and 1970s in which feminist women made it a norm not to have children in their search of emancipation from patriarchy.

We will instead focus on the silenced position of mother artists and disregard the many examples of representation of motherhood made by male artists, as well as by women artists who decided not to have children.

Our understanding of the subject of motherhood in the art world considers that to embrace motherhood as a subject should be done by mothers, as a product of the centuries where our voice has been kept in silence, and contrary to the many examples of depicturalization of motherhood done by male artists and female artists without children, which strongly collaborate to demerit maternal work and thus increase mother’s invisibility, as this dynamic has kept mother artists reduced to silence.

At the same time, in the art world to decide not to have children has counted with the strong belief that it affects negatively the artist’s career, see the case below of Marguerite Gérard, to mention just one, whilst in many cases childrearing is even harshly judged.

The current scenario is the result of economic dynamics in which a differentiable object to blame for the precarious life conditions is impossible to distinguish, as in Deleuze and Guattari’s words “the bourgeois is more utterly enslaved than the lowest of slaves”. “I too am a slave”—these are the new

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words spoken by the master.”4

In this context, at the same time that women have also found the proper environment to both gain independence and prosper economically like it never happened before, for many others, depending also on their geographic location, there is still necessary a more regulated economic environment in which they can finally find the necessary and sufficient conditions to thrive.

On the other hand, the hedonist position that insists in not rearing children, as well as the viewpoint regarding not having children because of an ecological commitment, and the pessimist vision on our general political and economical future, although they constitute the opposed perspective of the one here considered of giving motherhood a voice, they represent as well another kind of problem to the contemporary economic dynamics as they are responsible for the change in the ratio of workers and buyers, necessary to maintain the production system.

The general problems of not having children won’t be here however further discuss, as we won’t stop neither at the many complex reasons to decide whether or not having a child. We will instead focus on giving voice to the women that have been kept invisible, aiming to add a political dimension to motherhood and from this perspective thus problematize the contemporary economic dynamics.

The few examples of female artists who have conquered a position in the art market depicting motherhood have complied with the fact that these artists decided not to have children. For instance the work of French painter Marguerite Gérard from 1785 to 1825, in which she assesses progressive maternal genre scenes, as well as the impressionist American painter Mary Cassatt (1824-1926), to mention just few.

Regardless of being a support for her nephew and family Marguerite Gérard did not personally experienced motherhood because “perhaps she recognized how this would have adversely affected her career.”5

Contrary to Gérard and Cassatt, Jewish and French artist Chana Orloff is an early case of the complexities and adversities that mother artists who represent maternity face. Orloff’s statement “in order to be a successful female artist a woman must also experience motherhood, she would have put off many artists like hers to grow and evolve”6

Chana Orloff produced sculptures addressing motherhood at the beginning of the twentieth century that became very popular in the 1930s as they echoed the obsession about the subject in the interwar period, in response to the depopulation crisis.7

Her sculptures epitomize various moments between mothers and their children without portraying specific individuals.8

Many Parisian women artist rejected and even rebelled against the emphasis in pronatalism. Artists who Orloff depicted in sculptures like Claude Cahun and Anais Nin, among others, who knew publicly as modern women and as sexually and economically liberated artist, but not mothers, and “it is likely that these women chose either not to have children or not to endorse Orloff’s belief in a symbiotic relationship between mothering and artmaking.”9

The context in which Chana Orloff emerged was the pronatalist scenario that feminists inherited as the context in which Chana Orloff emerged was the pronatalist scenario that feminists inherited as the context in which Chana Orloff emerged was the pronatalist scenario that feminists inherited as

In parallel, German artist Käthe Kollwitz sent her younger son to World War I with “flowers and a copy of Faust.” After her son’s death Kollwitz became skeptical of the military honor and loyalty to the patria.

Kollwitz increasing antimilitarism led her to lose her teaching position and atelier, and she was also forbidden to exhibit her works.10

In 1938 Käthe Kollwitz created a small sculpture called “Tower of Mothers” –see Fig. 2- that depicts a circle of mothers protecting children amassed behind them, epitomizing the maternal antimilitarist position that have made her a “heroine of feminist peace politics.”11

Another early work that portrayed motherhood whilst being a mother, was Louise Bourgeois and for instance her series of drawings “Girl Falling” that began on 1947, which will be analyzed together with Bourgeois’ work development during the 1960s and 1970s.

These pioneer artists embraced isolated what would be more massively discussed by feminism during the decades of 1960 and 1970. We will thus point out the positions that emerged from the feminist movement; this is, as a result of the thinking tendency of the time. And we will consider feminism a multifaceted social movement that focuses on the ways that gender, as the social construction of masculine and feminine, organizes political, personal and intellectual life.

Our approach to feminism is that that has been thought by Sara Ruddick12 and that considers gender divisions and adversities that mother artists who represent maternity face.

As well as from Andrea O’Reilly we will consider feminism as a demand for equality and freedom of individual choice, as well as recognizing woman as an autonomous person. In sum, a commitment to promote gender equality,13 as we furthermore add that our understanding of feminism consists in extrapolating this commitment to a general sensible discernment of the unfairness that happen inside any traditional power structure.

Inside this framework, we will discuss in Chapter I some artworks that were produced during the decades of 1960 and 1970 as a reflection on the demand to change from motherhood to mothering, this is from patriarchy to feminist mothering.14 by mother artists like Louise Bourgeois, VALIE EXPORT, Hackney Flashers, Susan Hiller, Mako Idemitsu, Kirsten Justesen, Tina Keane, Mary Kelly, Frieda Kubelka vom Gröller, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Lea Lublin, Maria Evelia Marmolejo, Feministo, Fina Miralles, Mother Art, Ree Morton, Laura Mulvey (and Peter Wollen), Anna Oppermann, Gina Pane, Eva Partum, Elaine Rechek, Ursula Reuter Christiansen, Faith Ringgold, Martha Rosler, Ulrike Rosenbach, Niki de Saint Phalle, Zorka Saglova, Helke Sander, Mimi Smith and Annegret Soltau.

This research brings together the existing literature on the subject like from Rachel Epp Butler “Reconciling Art and Mothering”(2012), from Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein “The M-Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art”(2011) and Andrea Liss’ “Feminist Art and the Maternal”(2009). As well as we include extracts from the catalog of he exhibition “Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution”(2007), Cornelia Butler, and information from both online databases like reactfeminism.org and clara.nnwa.org, as well as from the artists’ websites, among others.

Subsequent to the discussion and analysis of these bodies of work, in Chapter II we aim to elaborate an approach to the Institutional Critique, inquiring about the role that motherhood plays within the art market and how this thus can be related to a broader critique on the Post-Fordist dynamics.

In Chapter III, we will briefly reflect on the relation of women with Capitalism, in its forms of Post-Fordist production and Neoliberalism, based mainly on the ideas of the theoretician Silvia Federici.

And finally in Chapter IV, we will discuss how the old disadvantaged position occupied by women within the economic web of relations, has developed to the contemporary phenomenon of migration, to which some works of mother artists relate.

6 Bimbau, Paula (2012)1 "Sculpting as a Modern Jewish Mother” In: Reconciling Art and Mothering, Edit Epp Buller, Rachel, Ashgate Pub Co p. 48
7 Ibid p. 49
8 Rudder, Sara (1989)”Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace”, Beacon Pr. p. 159

10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
14 as described by O’Reilly, Andrea (2008) Feminist Mothering, State Univ of New York Pr. p. 192
French-American artist Louise Bourgeois had a complex relation with feminism. She was introduced to feminism as all of her female relatives were “feminists and socialists—and ferociously so!”,\(^\text{15}\) and has been considered a feminist but it was despite her wish.

In the early 1970s she aligned herself with the burgeoning feminist art movement, and feminist critics although she was critical of the relationship between her gender and her work.

Bourgeois stated that “there is no feminist aesthetic. Absolutely not! There is a psychological content. But it is not because I am a woman that I work the way I do. It is because of the experiences I have gone through;”\(^\text{16}\) and she insisted: “we are all vulnerable in some way, and we are all male-female.”\(^\text{17}\)

Bourgeois’ work is all about relationships as a mother, as a daughter and as a wife.\(^\text{18}\)

The work “Girl Falling”(1947) -image above- illustrates the weight of maternity, multiplying like breasts, or phalluses or cysts, growing on a pregnant woman.

The drawing evokes the image of Romulus and Remus’ wolf foster-mother.

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16 Ibid
17 Ibid
18 http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/bourgeois/index.html
Later, the form of "Girl Falling" (1947) reappeared in a "Loose Sheet" (1959) -image above- that was found in the early months of 2010 in Bourgeois' apartment. The "Loose Sheet" belongs to the strenuous analysis of her dreams, anxieties and desires that Bourgeois underwent.19

In "Avenza" (1975) –image above-, which became part of "Confrontation" (1978) –below-, according to the website of Sotheby’s is "swelling masculinity and swollen femininity combined" as "Bourgeois' hybridisation of gendered tropes plays to her ambivalent identification with motherhood and lasting discord with the father figure."20

The latex costume appeared as a three-dimensional reflection of the drawing "Girl Falling" from 1947.

19 http://www.artbook.com/9781900828376.html

Bourgeois directed the installation “Confrontation” and the related performance “A Banquet/A Fashion Show of Body Parts” at the Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art in 1978. In words of Bourgeois’ assistant Jerry Gorovoy, “she choreographed the fashion show with people dressed in semi-transparent costumes made of latex with bulbous forms around (...) [The performance] was also about vulnerability and exposure,” which reminds the works of Kirsten Justesen “Circumstances Objects” (1971) more precisely the transparent torso filled with eyes; as well as the partly transparent womb-dress of Mimi Smith “Maternity Dress” (1966), that will be further discussed.

The spectators of Bourgeois’ performance were composed by art historians, scholars, critics and others, and were asked to sit on the boxes and watch others model costumes with forms evoking body parts. The spectators would additionally confront themselves in front of the others. In Bourgeois’ words they had to “face how limited and uninteresting they are. And every one of us has to do that in front of everybody else. At that point we have grown up.”

In the performance, Susan Cooper sang “She Abandoned Me” stressing the abandonment suffered by an elder person by his/her children, which according to Bourgeois “is just the opposite: it is the abandonment of the very young child by the elders.”

Bourgeois reflects this way on the feeling of abandonment that she experienced when her mistress, in another reason to consider why in general terms women artists do not embark in motherhood -which later on is regretted for some and for others not-, is the fact that career takes over personal life, more precisely as the artistic career counts with a particular compulsion. As Bertlmann describes:

Concerning my private situation I never excluded the idea of having a child because I had a partner who was very supportive. But as I was always working very obsessively, totally absorbed in my artistic work and there was obviously not enough physical, mental and emotional strength and disposition left over for getting a child.

She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver (...) Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.


During the year of 2011 one of her works titled “Spider” (1996), sold for $10.7 million, setting this way a new record price for the artist at auction, and the highest price paid for a work by a woman.

In Austria only two artists produced bodies of work addressing motherhood during the decades of 1960 and 1970. They are VALIE EXPORT as well as Friedl Kubelka vom Gröller. This reduced number of mother artists that reflected on the subject can be understood in words of Austrian artist Renate Bertlmann, who in a private interview stated that:

Of course, (the topics of motherhood) were intensely discussed in the seventies, especially for female artists, because most of them had to make a decision: art or child. Both were nearly impossible because they were responsible for raising up their children, as male consciousness concerning taking over it on a partnership basis did not exist, and neither paternal leave.

What to do then, when you find out that you need for your art 24 hours a day and also 24 hours a day for your little child?

For this reason Bertlmann produced the performance “Pregnant Bride in the Wheelchair” (1978) where, in her words:

I wanted to express the powerlessness and helplessness which (the situation above) can evoke. The bride (bound through the upcoming marriage) and the mother (bound through the unborn child), finds herself in a wheelchair, desperately seeking help from her surrounding, feeling incapable to find a solution for herself.

Finally the urge for self-fulfillment gets so strong, that she delegates the responsibility of her child (it is given birth symbolically at the end of the performance and the bride leaves the room) back to the society which is forcing her to act like that.

Another reason to consider why in general terms women artists do not embark in motherhood

Concerning my private situation I never excluded the idea of having a child because I had a partner who was very supportive. But as I was always working very obsessively, totally absorbed in my artistic work and there was obviously not enough physical, mental and emotional strength and disposition left over for getting a child.
Inside the context above described, renowned artist VALIE EXPORT approached the subject of maternity in the action "HOMO METER II" (1976), "Invisible Adversaries" (1976), as well as in the film "Menschenfrauen" (1979).

In "HOMO METER II" (1976) EXPORT tied a loaf of bread to her belly and offered to cut off a slice with a bread-knife to passers-by on Mariahilferstraße in Vienna.

With this action "the artist investigated elementary questions concerning fertility, publicity, and privacy, vulnerability, motherhood, birth, and transience, and stands in the context of the discussion regarding feminist theory and practice." 27

The action took place twice, one with VALIE EXPORT alone - see the photos above reproduced - and a second time with actresses from which a video was produced. 28

The series of actions of "HOMO METER II" (1976) resonates as a critique of the mother who, forced by the social pressure, gives her entrails away.

28 http://www.valieexport.at/en/werke/werke/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=2085&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=81&cHash=c662acbfbc, Retrieved 30.10.14
The film "Invisible Adversaries"(1976) is about destroyed identities and the wounds and deformations of our body as a result of societal forces.

At a certain point in the film a woman cuts the head off of a living fish, as well as tries to cut a living rat, a little parrot, a turtle and a beetle, elements that appeared every time replaced by the different groceries that she just brought in a bag. When the woman brings the milk in the refrigerator appears a baby inside. The surrealistic appearance of a baby in the fridge, whose body is under treatment to shape correctly –is it, to be formed inside the norms of a human body appearance?, appeals also to the role of the woman as the mother that shapes new beings, but likewise compels to ask what kind of a mother would forget her child in the fridge, opening many questionings. Had she forgotten her baby in the fridge? Why then the lack of surprise with the sudden presence of the baby in the refrigerator? Is this vision then a common hallucination? Is the baby one more of the living creatures she could feverish damage in her crisis? Why does it not generate any surprise?

In this context the baby is seen with detachment as a biological creature that belongs in the fridge, pointing to the complex role of the mother that contradicts the cultural expectations of the "good mother". In this direction, Andrea Liss points to the nuisances of the celebrated motherhood, and thus the neutralization of the woman in the shape of the "good mother", which still in the "post-feminist" culture occurs.

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 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.

As well as in the case of Kirsten Justesen who similarly addressed the subject of the "bad mother" by depicting a baby in a pan, Andrea Liss analyzes:

(…) 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 (inverse) name of patriotism, especially if that public mother has stepped too far out of her assigned place.

But also, the displacement of the baby as an edible material is a provocation that relates with the myth of witchcraft employed during the crisis of feudalism in the XVI and XVII centuries in European pre-capitalist societies, in order to mine women’s powers and force them to shift to the new economic system.

As described in Silvia Federici’s "Caliban and the Witch" one of the female powers to be fought was their free control on contraception that stroke the need of reproduction of workforce that early Capitalism urged. As a consequence women were prosecuted in large numbers, and a greater number was executed for infanticide than for any other crime, as witchcraft was considered a charge that also centered on the killing of children and other violations of reproductive norms.

On the other hand, it is known that during the colonial enterprise some indigenous women in the Andes committed suicide and killed their male children as a way to prevent them from going to the mines and out of disgust of the mistreatment they began to suffer by their male relatives, becoming for all these reasons the main enemies of colonialism, thus turning into the witches.

This way the crimes committed by mothers against their own offspring represented in EXPORT and Justesen’s work, call to attention the constantly ignored reasons that have pushed women to injure their children, behind which lies a long established tradition of precarious life conditions.

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29 An excerpt is available in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SB5sp8AcD+&index=51&list=PLkDMLCv8rgEZYmBdMfndQhRUI2
30 http://www.valieexport.at/en/werke/werke/?tx_ttnews%5Bpointer%5D=27&no_cache=1&sword_list%5B0%5D=unsichtbare&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=1997&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=190&cHash=cf2a0bdf7d

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32 Ibid.
34 Ibid. p. 88-89
35 Ibid. p. 230
The 1 hour and 48 minutes film “Menschenfrauen” (1979) is a continuation of both the critique EXPORT’s work has constantly done on women’s life conditions, as well as on the anguish characteristic of women’s life, which have been both persistently exposed in EXPORT’s work.

Intercalating scenes of difficult relationships both at work and between men and women, the film furthermore describes the ups and downs of motherhood.

For instance, a mother argues with her son and as the deterioration of their relationship is exposed, a flash back describes the sweet labor of taking care of the son as a child, filled of promises of a beautiful future.

Whilst in the present time the almost hysterical mother complains about the hard work she faces in order to stay with the now grown up son, at another scene her belongings are taken to solve her son’s debts. This way, in a flash back the legal fight she underwent in order to get the custody is presented. At court, another woman, because of being a student, has lost her daughter to her husband, an engineer. In the scene a male judge is likewise represented by the image of a recording machine projected in a television set, as a means to describe how the discourse he would have for women is so repetitive that could be played from a record.

Contrary to this, the mother is assigned a female judge who conversely, denies all father’s arguments to finally give the child’s custody to the mother.

Finally the mother tries to commit suicide as a product of a sadness that “a woman without children cannot understand”.

On the other hand, the element of denial of motherhood is also present in VALIE EXPORT’s work as it is a constant in the feminist philosophy of the sixties.

In “Menschenfrauen” (1979) a character declares:

Wenn die Frau eine Frau ist, dann nur als Mutter.
Wenn die Frau nur Frau ist, wenn sie Mensch ist, aber andererseits als Frau kein Mensch ist, dann wird die Frau zum Menschen, wenn sie keine Mutter mehr ist.

The excerpt translates to English: “A woman is just a woman if she is a mother. If the woman is just a woman, if she is a human being, but if on the other hand she is not a human being as a woman, then she becomes a human being, if she is not a mother anymore.”

EXPORT’s work strikes the retina in a way no other artistic work seems to do in relation to the female life conditions. Her shocking representations stay inside, growing as an implanted egg of dissatisfaction. This seems to be EXPORT’s trademark since at the age of twenty VALIE EXPORT had two children to right after divorce her husband and return to art school in Vienna to further pursue art. 36 It is known that VALIE EXPORT left her children in upper Austria with their aunt in order to study at the Hoehere Bundeslehr- und Versuchsanstalt for Textile Industry, in the Design Department.

Hackney Flashers was a collective that emerged in England in 1974 out of the initial group the Photography Workshop. The collective was named after Hackney, then a working-class neighborhood of East London.

In the Photography Workshop Jo Spence and Neil Martinson were seeking women photographers to contribute to a project on “Women and Work” for the Hackney Trades Council –image above- and continued thus documenting issues like work and domesticity, mainly through photography, as they furthermore produced an archive of images around class and gender.

One of their mission statements was “to encourage the photographic recording of personal, group and local history by people themselves, with or without the assistance of professional photographers,” 37 as their work demanded equal pay and training opportunities, alternatives to marriage and families, safe contraception and free day nursery. 38

38 https://hackneyhistory.wordpress.com/2013/06/21/the-hackney-flashers/
In the Hackney Flashers’ exhibition on childcare “Who’s still holding the Baby” in 1978 –whose poster is the image above- was produced the panel “Who’s holding more than the baby?” (aprox. 1974) -image below- where it is stated that:

Being a mother and a housewife not only means having kids and looking after them, so that one day they can be workers. It also means keeping men clean and fed and emotionally supported – in other words keeping them in working order, fit for the factory or the office or the dole queue. This maintenance work is unpaid and undervalued. If all women went on strike, our society would grind to a halt.

For this exhibition was also produced the panel “Who is holding the baby?” (1978) –image below- where the working women’s situation is described:

You’ve tucked the kids into bed…
slipped into something simple…
taken your Valium…
and you’re waiting for him to come home…
mustn’t be late for the evening shift at the bread factory

This description of the worker is placed next to the ad of a nail polish.

The production of the material for “Who’s still holding the baby?” consisted of panels and posters that were lightweight and laminated, ideal for use in non-galleries settings.

In this exhibition were similarly presented the posters “Who’s holding the baby… and often alone”, referring to women of the most different conditions who have to stay at home to take care of their children without any support from their spouses, as well as it is also implied that these women neither exist in the government policies.
In the same exhibition was presented the poster “Who’s holding the baby... and Where”, in which the difficulties for women with children to access cheap rent reinforces the urge to solve their precarious life conditions, in the same direction of the work of German filmmaker Helke Sander that will be later in this Chapter addressed.

Another work produced by Hackney Flashers is “Working Lives”(1980) that continued the research began in the seventies by the collective. Members of the group were Ruth Barrenbaum, An Dekker, Terry Dennett, Helen Grace, Sally Greenhill, Liz Heron, Gerda Jager, Michael Ann Mullen, Maggie Murray, Neil Martinson, Jini Rawlings, Christine Roche, Nanette Salomon, Jo Spence, Arlene Strasberg, Sue Treweek and Julia Vellacott.
American artist Susan Hiller produced in 1977-1979 in London the piece “Ten Months” in which she photographed her body every day, during the ten months of her pregnancy.

In a period where pregnancy was not considered a subject for art, Hiller did not intend to create an artwork, and she was “just trying to keep a record of the internal and external changes of that period.”

According to the theoretician Andrea Liss the role for women to play is complex when relating to the “patriarchal discourse (that) has coded pregnancy as that which should not and could not be seen,” at the same time that it compels to hide the passion and sexuality that created the child, whilst declaring it a sentimental subject.

In this scenario Hiller breaches the taboo exhibiting her pregnant belly in her series of photographs, after cropping off the rest of the body.

What in our eyes of middle 21st century appear to be scientific and already common photographs, was recalled by Hiller in completely different terms thirty years later:

I was told by someone important in the art world that with this work I separated myself by joining the feminists and that I ruined my career. But who cares? I had a substantial track record.41

At the same time the Installation of “Ten Months” counts with ten texts located the first five under the first five groups of descending pictures, and then, the five subsequent texts are located on top of the series of pictures.

This written analysis that accompanies the daily images reads Hiller’s reflections regarding the self and art. For instance in the fifth text she states how “she now understands that it is perfectly possible to forget who one has been and what one has accomplished.”42 And ends: “Continuing the piece requires great effort.”43

In the text number six, in the same direction of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Hiller states that “She speaks (as a woman) about everything, although they wish her to speak only about women’s things. They like her to speak about everything only if she does not speak “as a woman”, only if she will agree in advance to play the artist’s role as neutral (neuter) observer.

She does not speak (as a woman) about anything, although they want her to. There is nothing she can speak of “as a woman”. As a woman, she can not speak.

In a broader approach, Spivak’s ideas remark the radical invisibility suffered by third-world women and this reasoning is also pointed out here, as the representation of motherhood in the art world appear to have begun to be done by a majority of white artists, as we will later discuss with the case of Faith Ringgold.

What in words of Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein,

(Some contemporary) artworks have challenged the representation of motherhood as an institution that is primarily white, middle class, young and heterosexual.45

Japanese artist Mako Idemitsu produced a series of films where she criticizes the patriarchal aspect of her culture. In “At Any Place”(1978) the artist describes the oppression lived by the housewives and relates it with the trivialities of their duties.

In the work a woman attends the children, mops the floor and prepares the dinner, pantomimed by Japanese dancer Yoneyama Marnako.

The movements of the dancer are accompanied by changes in the background like clouds and sunsets and bonfires, in a way that reached more Japanese than western sensibilities.

Idemitsu’s work continued to depict the problematics of motherhood like the film “Hideo, It’s Me, Mama”(1983) where Idemitsu addresses the substitution of human interaction for the television, as well as the not uncommon fact that mothers prioritize children’s lives over their own.

In the film a woman places plates of food in front of a television set, which displays images of her son, as well as she shouts to the television and simultaneously takes care of it.

As analyzed by Cornelia Butler,

The woman states that she “only lives for (her son),” revealing her identity and worth as dependent upon her work at home and underlining the artist’s contention that “video and children (are) now being used as substitutes to fill the emptiness of the lives of many Japanese house wives.46

Recent works such as “Kiyoko’s Situation”(1989) and “Koe, Act like a Girl”(1996) deal with the subject of Japanese women who are struggling to be artists while confronting their role as mothers and wives. A subject to which Idemitsu addresses from an intimate point of view, broadening this way women’s cultural roles.

40 Ibid. pos. 272. Kindle Edition
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid. pos. 288
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid. pos. 288-293
Danish artist Kirsten Justesen found herself producing work from the gender’s perspective in her aim to formally approach the female body. Justesen’s work on motherhood began with her “Event” (1969) where she reproduced her pregnant torso in 4 natural size glass-fiber sculptures, to which printed matter, family photos, photocopies, plastic flowers, gauze and leather was embedded.

Subsequently Justesen produced the series of posters “Pussy Power” (1969-1971) in which a pregnant woman is depicted and this way Justesen allies mother’s power and the idea of the goddess to a feminism that dealt with these subjects only from a theoretical approach. Justesen additionally translated the formal reflection of the posters into a three-dimensional PVC sculpture in 1971.

Kirsten Justesen used her own body to create a work that “constitutes a tale about a woman’s body.”

Her work is a monument to her body, as it gets thicker and thinner, or pregnant. It is just at hand for her work. Justesen’s body is her tool, her surface and an icon for the human female body, through which she depicts her personal history and battles against tradition and conventions.

In order to avoid the expressions that a face carries, Justesen uses mostly a body without a face, treating the body, in her words, as “a temple, a pedestal, or whatever.”

Justesen’s work is all about a female gaze on her own body. As she states: “of course art history is full of naked women, but this one is the artist herself. Good. We are getting forward.”

“Circumstances Objects” (1971) points to the same direction as “Event” (1969). The series of 10 vacuum-pressed subjects in clear PVC of 50 x 40 x 26 cm, assesses the symbolic weight of motherhood as the transparent pregnant torsos are filled with pre-fixed ideas of motherhood and femininity, from the optic of the social conventions.

The series furthermore has to do with vulnerability and exposure as it was already mentioned with the work of Louise Bourgeois. We will address this aspect later with the work of Mimi Smith. The torsos are filled with elements like, for instance the image of a nurse taking care of two babies in a stroller “TVILLINGER” or “Twins” in English; as well as another torso contains silicon baby shoes. This is the case of “VINTERSTØVLER” or “Winter Boots”. Toy heads are found in “KINESERBØRN” or “Chinese Children”; a grater is embedded in “ØJNE LØBER I VAND” or “Eyes Run in Water”; a white wig is part of “UFØDT LAM” or “Unborn Lamb”; a table cloth belongs to “RØDE PRIKKER” or “Red Dots”; as well as eyes are placed in “SUTTEFLASKE” or “Baby Bottles”; a red ball in “KUGLE” or “Ball” and a cake on top of which lies a baby in “KRANSEKAGE-BABY” or “Rim Cake-Baby.”

47 Ibid. p. 252
48 Interview at http://channel.louisiana.dk/video/kirsten-justesen-my-body-my-gaze, Retrieved 30.10.14
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
“Body Circumstances” (1973) continues the study on the pregnant body, this time treating it with rawness. Justesen’s body does not hide the imperfections whilst her make up reminds a pantomimic actress. In the pictures, her studio appears familiar with a kitchen, a flesh market or a slaughterhouse.

Also, in the work “Imaginations and Conjurations” (1971) the same “actress” hidden behind the pantomimic make up, prepares bread in no particular order with her breast milk, as well as is shown waiting, making a ritual over her pregnant belly and transporting the little bread pieces clumsily until they fall from the tray.

Another work produced inside Justesen’s studio is “Torso” (1973), where the torso represented stands next to the model in a series of photographs that are at times provocative and others romantic.

“Prairie Images” (1974) reproduces a photograph of two children under a tree in three different circumstances: on top of a baby bottle, in “The Bottle”, above a nappy in “Diaper”, and on top of a baby body suit, in “Romper Suit.” The series articulates together the labor of care done by the mother, which hides behind the idealized image of happy children.
The silk prints "Housewife Images" (1974-1975) translate the world from the point of view of a mother, not exempt from asphyxiation and madness. An example of this is "Med Koldt Blod" or "Cold blood" in English, where dead birds, as well as a bird in a cage, stand together with a blind woman without and her baby. Or "Flaskerne", or "Bottles" in English, where the buildings of the urban landscape are replaced by baby bottles. In "Babyen", or "Baby" in English, a baby lies on a pan. Is he/she going to be fried? The shocking image recreates the idea of the "bad mother" who is mean to him/her, and even proceeds to have him/her for lunch. This aspect will be further discussed with the work of VALIE EXPORT.

Finally, Justesen speaks about the mother artist in the difficult search for balance between children and career in her work "By Glimpses #1 & #2" (1978).

In #1, the c-print shows a monstrous bust of polished stone standing alone in a patio, accompanied by the laundry, a sandbox, photographs and toys.

In #2, a clay bust is being sculpted and the patio has been chaotically filled with children of all ages.

The action “Shadow Woman”(1977) was originally conceived during Keane's journey to Scotland isles and the artist was impressed by the image of the passengers on a boat casting shadows on the water below them. As a metaphor for time’s passing, Keane's daughter Emily participated in the performance “where a hopscotch pattern was chalked on the floor.”51 In each square a poem about the passage of time was inscribed, like for instance:

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The shadow of my daughter
Becomes the shadow of life
As I will become the shadow of hers
As my mother
Grandmother and
Great grandmother.
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From child to adult
From hopscotch to maze
From girl to woman
From tale to labyrinth of time52

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52 Ibid. p.119
In "Swing"(1978) Keane uses a large child's swing, set up before three monitors where black and white footage of a solitary swinging figure is overlaid with a chalk sketch of the pendular movement. In an analytic tone, this sketch reads: "up/down/up, high/low/dream, inspiration/reality/fantasy, movement/safety/fear, imagination/game/rules/risk, new boundaries."53

The repetitive swing increasingly diffuses the screen to white light.

In the video Keane exposes video's proximity to painting and drawing, techniques that she employed before and that were replaced as the new video techniques allowed her to have her daughter with her, at the same time that the new language caused the artist great amusement.55

In the 20 minutes video performance "Playpen"(1979) eleven women -from a child of 6 months to a woman of 82 years old- were asked to sit in the playpen for 2 minutes and, without direction, were left to their own devices.

According to Keane the tape was originally made for a performance where she sat in the playpen with a mirror and a static camera. Through manipulating the mirror, the reflection of the audience was relayed onto the monitor. And simultaneously the pre-recorded video was shown on another monitor. Keane describes "Playpen" as follows:

The relevant verses of the 'Suzy' song are interspersed throughout the tape, overlaid on the original soundtrack of afternoon TV, women’s and children's voices, and one voice giving camera direction. The high camera angle gives an 'adult' point of view, the extent/limitation of the zoom and aperture echoes the restrictions on the occupants of the playpen. 56

This video recording of a live situation in Tina Keane's studio was integrated into later live performances, amongst others, at Franklin Furnace in 1981. For this performance, Keane herself was in the playpen videotaping visitors using a mirror while "Playpen" was playing on an additional monitor.57

"Clapping Songs"(1981) is a video made of slides, in order to isolate and emphasize the action in which two girls sing traditional clapping songs. In Keane's words: "the songs are extremely funny, but with a double edge -particularly 'Susy', which illustrates, with a high degree of irony, a woman's life from the cradle to the grave."58

And finally, another work of Keane reflecting on motherhood is "Bedtime Story"(1982), in which the story of Bluebeard unfolds as a model of tales that mark the dangers that a woman faces in the pursuit of knowledge.

The 16 minutes film questions how attitudes are often placed in our subconscious since a very young age through children's stories.
The best-known work reflecting on motherhood created during the decade of 1970 is "Post Partum Document"; a 139-piece work, created from 1973 to 1979 by the American artist Mary Kelly. The work counts with an exhibition as a display, as well as conferences and the subsequent publication of a book in 1983.

The seven sections of the work –Introduction and Documentation I to VI- are compound of an imbricated collection of traces, diagrams, objects and texts, as well as a "set of theoretical discourses, to which the "Subject" of the Document intertextually refers."59

According to the theoretician Juli Carson in the work converge Conceptualist art practice, the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the field of semiotic-psychoanalytic film theory. Kelly was initiated into Conceptualist while attending St. Martin’s School of Art in London from 1968-1970 and noticed that Conceptualism was short when investigating subjectivity and sexual difference. Thus domestic labor and “femininity” were positioned in “Post-Partum Document” (1973-1979) as a viable set of “system analysis”. But Kelly also adhered to the ideas of Joseph Kosuth, inscribing her production as conceptual artist from the foundational mode of questioning the very nature of art, proposing within the context of art a comment on art that would be later known as institutional critique.60

The second concept of the Women’s Liberation’s Movement was foundational of Kelly’s “Post-Partum Document” (1973-1979). Mary Kelly belonged to the Women’s Liberation’s Movement in England through the participation in the History Group which edited the magazine “Shrew” in 1970 that debated a number of ideological sites ranging from the Left’s ambivalent relation to women’s liberation, the media’s spectacularization of History Group which edited the magazine “Shrew” in 1970 that debated a number of ideological sites ranging from the Left’s ambivalent relation to women’s liberation, the media’s spectacularization of the many layers of Kelly’s work, the most radical aspect consisted in speaking about motherhood from the first person and inside the art field, this time also in note of the female representation. 70

In this respect in a conversation with Laura Mulvey, Kelly recalls asking “Why can’t an artwork be like a film, why can’t it be drawn out, perhaps serialized, and the spectator be drawn into it in a way that creates the space for a critical reading?”63 Which is how the ultimate serialization and final shape of “Post Partum Document” works, as well as the elements of real time and documentation were likewise brought form Kelly’s approach to semiotic-psychoanalytic film theory.

From the many layers of Kelly’s work, the most radical aspect consisted in speaking about motherhood from the first person and inside the art field, this time also in note of the female representation. In Carson’s words:

The mother’s role (…) doubled for that of the artist, allowing the “subject of inquiry” to incorporate both an analysis of the artist-as-mother’s perception and unconscious reiteration of “paternal” structures within the discourse of childbirth and child care, as well as the “problematic” related to iconic representations of the woman’s body within art practice.65

As well as with Susan Hiller’s work, “Post-Partum Document” (1973-1979) produced a national scandal within the North American press, regarding the "museum deeming "dirty nappies" art.”66

In the vivid scenario of struggles to liberate women from traditional roles that subjugated them inside domestic labors, by the time Kelly’s work was shown in the decade of 1970s, it had to face harsh critiques by the feminists, of “de-pictorializing […] the spectacle of the maternal experience itself, (which) alienated women from the cause of liberation.”67

“Post Partum Document” (1973-1979) began when Kelly, Mary Kelly’s son was an infant and concluded as he began to develop language and entered school. The work established the active role of the mother in the relation mother/child, contrary to Freudian psychoanalytic concept of the mother as passive.68 As well as the work adhered to Lacanian psychoanalysis, where the imaginary “is the space in which the infant lives in the maternal realm, before language, as opposed to the Symbolic, where the child accesses language and moves into the patriarchal world,”69 as described by the theoretician Andrea Liss.

As Juli Carson explains:

This is what Kelly took up in the Document, interested in how the subjectivities of the mother and infant, reciprocally imbricated within a psycho-sexual linguistic structure, could be indexically represented (both formally and semiotically) in place of a conventional portrait or artwork.65

In “Introduction” to “Post Partum Document” –Image 1 below- Kelly inscribed Lacanian diagrams onto four wool vests that her son had recently outgrown, giving this way shape to an ironic pseudo scientific language which added seriousness to the work, inviting the viewer to read a critique only between the lines, whilst its solemnity allowed the work to be accepted. But also, Kelly’s approach was protective with the female representation, as Liss points out:

Kelly’s strategic employment of indexical rather than mimetic representation was deeply related to this necessity to shield the mother from further harm. This strategy was part of interconnected debates in British feminism in the early 1970s that focused on the uneasy status of representing women’s bodies.70

Although “Post Partum Document” was mainly produced based in the indexical representation of the relation woven between a mother and a son, the cover of the book breaches her self imposed rule regarding mimetic representation, as on it we find Kelly posing with her son, who sits on her lap.

When asked about the contradiction of using a photograph, for the Book, Kelly’s answer points to a deep sense of humor, as well as to playfulness and irony, as in her words, this image was "always meant to parody the Michelangelo Tondo”.71 –Images 2 and 3 below-

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63 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
Kelly moreover produced another project with mimetic characteristics while working on “Post-Partum Document” (1973-1979). “Primapara, Bathing Series” (1974), is a series of close-up photographs of her son, in black-and-white, that similarly insists in the active labor of the mother taking care of her child.
The first series of “Post Partum Document” (1973–1979) is “Document I: Analysed Faecal Stains and Feeding Charts” (1974), where the mother measures and registers the baby’s intake of food and the exact time when it was administrated. In the series, charts and dirty diapers are exhibited.

The artist produced this first documentation over the period of three months and at the same time that it describes the obsessive precaution, thus fear, of the mother who introduced the baby to solid food, its direct approach was interpreted as too raw, shocking the public.

In “Documentation II: Analysed Utterances, Related Speech Events” (1975), Kelly listens and analyzes the development of the baby’s speech, as well as documents the language formation.

In “Documentation III: Analysed Markings and Diary-perspective Schema” (1975), Kelly points to the formation of language through the first drawings of his son, made during his time in nursery school.
"Documentation IV: Transitional Objects, Diary and Diagram" (1976) documents the separation anxiety faced by Kelly when the artist needs to work outside home.

In "Documentation IV", Kelly placed a mold of a newborn’s hand above each work, which worked as "indexically markers of presence and absence." 72

For Kelly,

Probably the most profound discovery from a theoretical point of view, if I could claim anything like that, is found in "Documentation IV", where I describe something like the fort-da game for the mother, that is, how she tries to conceptualize the child’s absence. First she hangs on – “you’re still my baby” – then she lets go – “you’re so grown up now.” 73

72 Ibid. Kindle Edition pos. 446

Each artwork is a triptych in "Documentation V: Classified Specimens, Proportional Diagrams, Statistical Tables, Research and Index" (1977). On the left, objects that Kelly’s son found in their garden and offered to her as gifts are exhibited. The middle section configures a representation of the gift within a Lacanian diagram, and the third section is compound by medical drawings of the woman’s reproductive body, also with a Lacanian diagram. 74

In Kelly’s words:

Documentation V was a hard one. He would bring me a snail and say, “Do you have a hole in your tummy?” I couldn’t figure it out. What did they have to do with each other? Finally I juxtaposed the questions and the specimens with a kind of non-answer in the form of a diagram representing a full-term pregnancy and a list of medical terms. (…) But what that meant in my universe, I guess, is that he was finding out that I didn’t have the phallus; in other words, I wasn’t this powerful person who could meet all his demands, and in fact, I probably was going to be demoted once he put me in the social order of things! And that did happen. You know, at school they asked him what his father did and he said, “He’s an artist.” But when they asked him what his mother did, he said, “I don’t know.”

Then I started to think about the mother as the “Real Other”, the unrepresentable supplement that breeds the object a as Lacan says. No one occupies this position, but it’s the site of many projections. 75

74 Ibid. Kindle Edition pos. 471
The documentation of the separation experienced by Kelly continues in "Documentation VI: Pre-writing Alphabet, Exergue and Diary" (1978). This time the mother acts as archaeologist, engaging in her son’s acquisition of writing.

By the time of the sixth Documentation, in Kelly’s words: “when he wrote his name […] I felt I couldn’t go on. I thought: he’s the author of his text now—a kind of superstition that to pursue this would be madness.”

As it was already mentioned, the greatest value of Mary Kelly’s “Post Partum Document” (1973-1979) is its approach to motherhood not anymore as an observer, but from the Kelly’s relation with her son Kelly Barrie, where the mother comes this way out of silence.

In note of psychoanalytical explanation of both the mother’s silence and her desire to speak, an excerpt from "Post-Partum Document" (1973-1979) reads:

The construction of femininity as essentially natural and maternal is never finally fixed but forever unsettled in the process of articulating her difference, her loss. And it is precisely at such moments, that it is possible to desire to speak and to dare to change.

On the other hand, the repetitive elements inside each of the series of "Post Partum Document" (1973-1979) increase the solemnity of Kelly’s approach to the subject of motherhood. Although a parody, the work echoes a rather strong critique that has given Kelly’s work not only a position inside art history, but also the status of the most seminal reference of artworks dealing with the subject of motherhood in the decades of 1960 and 1970.

In 2008 Mary Kelly and her son Kelly Barrie created a collaborative installation for the Sidney Biennale in which to Kelly’s super 8 film of her pregnant belly "Antepartum" (1973) Barrie superposed his video recording "Astral Fields" (2008).

Friedl Kubelka vom Gröller in “Lebensportrait Louise Anna Kubelka” (1978-1996) or in English “Portrait Louise Anna Kubelka” took a picture of her daughter every Monday for 18 years. The series of photographs began on October 21, 1978 when Louise Kubelka, daughter of Friedl and Peter Kubelka, was born in Vienna.

This act of “Monday photo,” as her daughter Louise came to call it, is part ritual, part performance and part obsession, from which the catalog that accompanied the exhibition at the Gallery Fothof in 1998 turned a book. The book was untitled “Friedl Kubelka: Portrait Louise Anna Kubelka”. Arranged in grids of 52 photographs, in the work we see the passing of 18 years, in which Susan Sontag’s ideas about parenthood are taken to a new dimension. In Sontag’s words:

Cameras go with family life. According to a sociological study done in France, most households have a camera, but a household with children is twice as likely to have at least one camera as a household in which there are no children. Not to take pictures of one’s children, particularly when they are small, is a sign of parental indifference, just as not turning up for one’s graduation picture is a gesture of adolescent rebellion.

This way, the obsessive work of Kubelka describes the accelerated time passing from the nostalgic maternal gaze. Moreover the work depicts a not always happy daughter, cases on which the maternal authority appears to have been applied. The series thus contains the question of whether the mother artist had the right of scrutiny of the daughter’s personal image. This “collaborative” work was questioned by Louise:

I have asked myself whether my mother had the right to use me as an object in this way.

Additionally, Louise explains:

When I look at this child in the process of growing up, I see a person who is too serious. Although I know my mother wanted to avoid the artificial cheerfulness of common photographs, I think she should have depicted me true to my respective moods.

However, on the positive side, adds Louise:

(…) Had she waited until I had been able to make that decision for myself, my life portrait wouldn’t exist.

Besides, the work depicts an uneasy relationship mother-daughter as a review of the book reads:

By the last year, the 18th, only 12 images appear in the first few months until finally the ritual is broken.

(…) This project is about the tight flow of time but more importantly for me, it is tainted with melancholy once the gaps in the grids start to appear. The bond implied by the structure shifts as most parent/child relationships will, and the silence of those gaps make it apparent that Louise has created a life apart from her mother. This series seems to be one mother’s way to resist that change. An act of anticipated desperation presented as art.
Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work has been since the mid-1960s fundamentally about nurturing and maintaining natural and psychic life systems, as well as acknowledging the undervalued labor of the people who keep those systems alive.

Early Ukeles's production discussed the work involved in mothering, which developed into her Maintenance Art projects.

Her concern has always been to call attention to the devalued work of laborers who remain invisible, and since her first projects Ukeles linked the work of the nameless in the public sphere with the private domestic labor of women. Ukeles's "appeal was to give a sense of humanness and worth to the nameless".83

Her interest in dealing with the subject of motherhood began when she was pregnant of her first child in 1968 and her teacher in her sculpture class proclaimed: "Well, Mierle, I guess you know you can’t be an artist now."84 To which she thought: "What are you talking about? I wanted to be a mother; it was a great blessing. But I was in a panic that it meant I couldn’t be an artist."85

And alike Susan Hiller, Ukeles manifested:

"Through free choice and love, I became pregnant. I had a child by choice. I was in an all-out crisis. People only saw me as a mother. The culture had no place for me. There were no words for my life. I was split into two people: artist and mother. I had fallen out of the picture. I was in a fury."86

For this reason Ukeles wrote in one sitting her “Manifesto for Maintenance Art”(1969), where she differentiated the male approach to art as “Death Instinct: separation, individuality…”87 and her Maintenance Art as “The Life Instinct: unification, eternal return, the perpetuation and the maintenance of the species.”88

A part of the Manifesto reads:

(...) housewives = no pay. Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby’s diaper, finish the report, correct the typos, mend the fence, keep the customer happy, throw out the stinking garbage, watch out- don’t put things in your nose, what shall I wear, I have no sox, pay your bills, don’t litter, save string, wash your hair, change the sheets, go to the store, I’m out of perfume, say it again-he doesn’t understand, seal it again-it leaks, go to work, this art is dusty, clear the table, call him again, flush the toilet, stay young."89

Ukeles Manifesto was published with four photographs where Ukeles staged domestic labor. In “Maintenance Art: Dusting a Baffle” Ukeles cleans a shower curtain.

Depicting motherhood through a dirty nappy like Mary Kelly, the following photograph of the manifesto is “Maintenance Art: Rinsing a B.M. Diaper”. 

84 Ibid. pos 639
85 Ibid. pos 645
86 Ibid. pos 649
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid. pos 656
Additionally, as part of the manifesto there were “Maintenance Art: Mopping the Floor” and finally, “Maintenance Art: Pregnant Woman Cleaning a Chicken Foot”.

Breaking the taboo, Mierle Laderman Ukeles dares to declare art ordinary activities. As she stated in her manifesto:

(…)Everything I say is Art is Art. Everything I do is Art is Art. I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order.) I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, supporting, preserving, etc. Also (up to now separately) I do Art. Now, I will simply do these everyday things and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them as Art.90

In the same direction the series of ninety-five contact prints framed together, untitled “Maintenance Art Task: Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Come In”(1973), shows the repetitive as well as exhausting activity of taking care of two young children in winter.

In the performance held at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston “Some Kinds of Maintenance Cancel Out Others, Keep Your Head Together- 1,000 Times, or Babysitter Hangup-Incantation Ritual”[1974], Ukeles repeated approximately 500 times the following, “Procedure”:

1. Begin: Call New York long distance & ask babysitter if babies (3) are o.k.? o.k.
2. Hang string back and forth across full length of gallery [30ft.].
3. Read each set of statements out loud on each page.
4. Scamp each page with Maintenance Art Stamp.
5. Clip it to string.
6. Move on to next identical page.
7. Fill up whole space with words and sheets, move up the stairs and outside to boundary of I.C.A.- street.
8. If I say it enough times, (maybe) it will come true.
9. Call N.Y.C. and ask babysitter if children are o.k.? o.k.

END91

Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Mary Kelly would find in the theme of separation anxiety a common arena from which they produced their work.

In her performance, Ukeles gives shape to a ritual in which she does not distance from reality, as she describes her profound conflict with leaving her children in New York whilst traveling to Boston to have a show. Just like Mary Kelly depicted her anxiety when she needed to work outside home leaving baby Kelly.

90 Ibid pos. 662
91 Ibid pos. 707-711
In both approaches the element of repetition plays an important role, being this for Ukeles an almost religious one.

In her way of mourning the separation, Ukeles hopes that if she repeats enough times, that is 500 times, the question if the children are o.k, and the answer of the babysitter: "o.k", "it will come true."92

In "Fall Time Variations III, Children’s Piece: Time Stop (Tree Droppings- The Leaving Home of the Leaves)"(1974), Ukeles projects the separation anxiety into the future. -Image above-

In the piece three fallen leaves represent each of her three children. In a rite that mixed burial with the promise of the future, the artist calls out her children’s married names and brings in an envelope the leaves with soil and hair of their children, to bury it and this way let go the sorrow of facing the idea of her children leaving.

Reflecting on this piece, Ukeles said she was thinking about her children leaving her, as she did to her mother: "I think it’s one of the hardest parts of being a mother, their leaving. The tree lets the leaves go."93

The poetic and religious approach of Ukeles appears in her work in the shape of vulnerability, as in her words:

A feeling of vulnerability and interdependency is what my art is all about, and that’s a religious position, to feel that and say that it’s okay to be vulnerable and dependent.
It’s actually wonderful.94

92  Ibid pos. 715
93  Ibid pos. 767
94  Ibid. pos. 779
Argentinian artist Lea Lublin’s “Mon fils” (1968), or “My son” in English, is a radical invitation to the public to observe the artist nursing her seven months old son Nicolas during the whole exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

The performance was consequent with Lublin’s concern of merging daily life into the museum, refusing to privilege art over life, and connecting this way her identities as artist, woman and mother.95 “Mon Fils” is one of the first performances of Lublin; in it “art, daily life, motherhood and conceptual and political issues were all combined in Lublin’s performative displacing of domestic labour to a museum.”96

From another perspective, Colombian artist María Evelia Marmolejo produced a series of work reflecting on motherhood since 1979. “Tendidos” (1979), or “Hangings” in English, was produced for her final semester exam, and consisted of a clothes line made of used and clean sanitary pads, tied to one another.

As a repetitive element in Laderman Ukeles, Justesen and Kelly, in “Tendidos” a cloth nappy was placed at the end of the line.

The whole line hung from a butcher’s hook, which stands for a political approach to the subject of motherhood lived in territories where life is an unsure right: “Marmolejo produced this work in protest for the brutal torture and rape—often with metal objects—of peasant and university women, sometimes pregnant, by the Colombian Army.”97

Similar to Kelly, Marmolejo’s work was not accepted as art and the artist was forced to quit art school.

During the decade of 1980 María Evelia Marmolejo produced a radical body of work in which her performances counted with placentas that she used to cover herself like in “Anonym 4” (1982), as well as she explored cutting herself and drawing with her blood in 1979, as well as in “Anonym 1” (1981). Marmolejo used as well her menstrual blood directly from her vagina to imprint the walls of the gallery San Diego, Bogotá (1982), and in “Residuos II” (1984), the artist included a fetus in a compressed bag, together with a used sanitary pad installed with other bags of organic matter,98 bringing together inquiries about artistic materials and methods, but mainly about femininity, motherhood, violence and ecological destruction.

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96 http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=219&me=t, Retrieved 30.10.14
98 Ibid.
The spirit of art as a domestic activity in England during the seventies from where the group Feministo emerged, was captured by Monica Ross in the following idea:

...and we went out in the streets with buckets and flyposted the posters we’d silkscreened during the night on Phil Goodall’s kitchen table and pegged up to dry next to the socks and the nappies.99

Monica Ross also participated in the group Feministo, which began in the middle of the decade of seventies as postal correspondence between Kate Walker and Sally Gallop, friends who were unable to see each other as Gallop moved to the Isle of Wight. Gradually the network expanded to 25 women that were between 19 and 60 years old. These women shared their isolation and exclusion from artistic and urban circles and most of them were living the answer: “2/3 of all art students are women, but where do they go when they leave?”100

Feministo refers to a word play “female manifesto” and some members of the group were Su Richardson whose work comprises “Nappy Sandwich”, a reflection on unequal balance of domestic labor afforded to the female gender, as well as “Crochet Breakfast” and “Crochet Table”. Other members of the collective were Monica Ross, Phil Goodall, and her initiator Kate Walker, among others.

Kate Walker began with the idea of “Postal Events” as it was “the only kind of art that we can produce, while the Children’s T.v. is on.”101 And she first used the household waste, supermarket packages, cartons, etc. to produce the “Packaged Ladies”.

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As well as Walker’s work “Keep Smiling” consisted on a box of homemade chocolate with the shape of lips and vaginas, among other shapes.

The works of Feministo were produced in small size in order to fit the post boxes, as they were sent from one artist to the other, and were light enough to make the delivery cheap.

Likewise, in this respect Phil Goodall wrote that “women’s lifestyles tend to contain small time-scales, brief moments – we need flexibility to deal with the tiny important moments that children, friends, lovers, present”.102

By the end of the seventies Feministo evolved into a major touring exhibition that occupied various public spaces around Great Britain, most notably the ICA in London, where the reviews were rather harsh critiques. All that remains is the documentation of the work or the memory of it, as these works were not meant to be commercialized. They returned to their owners and were “stolen, some fell apart and some of it was thrown away,”103 as Walker commented.

A critique on the part of the work that was exhibited in Berlin in 1977 in the exhibition “Künstlerinnen International” or in English “International Female Artists” reads: “Women’s daily life is shown: housework, children, sexuality, work of love and love of work. The suffering in it. The whole insecure existence of women. All these little pieces together show a harsh picture of the female artist as a housewife.” 104

Feministo has been considered as “perhaps the first large-scale, collaborative work to relocate artistic production from the studio to the domestic space.”105

Fina Miralles’ work “Standard”(1976) reflects on the life conditions of post-Franco’s Spain.

In the performance “Standard”, which took place at the Gallery G in Barcelona, Fina Miralles sits tied to a wheelchair, exposed to the slide projection of images where an older woman dresses up a girl in a room, with all the rituals and manners of traditional Spanish femininity. In the projection images from advertising and fashion were also included, which represented the female condition. The norms imposed by the gender disciplining are thus infringed upon the girl’s body.106

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103 Ibid. p.112
105 Ibid.
Mother Art is a collective of artist-mothers who met through their involvement in the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles in 1974.

Laura Silagi, one of the participants in the Feminist Studio Workshop in the Building, was shocked that an institution supposedly founded on feminist principles, was indeed unwelcoming to mothers and children:

While there was support for art dealing with certain issues, support for those of us, both lesbian and heterosexual, who had children was totally lacking. In fact, we faced overt hostility when it came to the subject of motherhood and children. 107

To point how contradictory the decade of 1970s appeared, an important precept of feminism was that “women’s bodies were sacred because of their connection to nature, the goddess, and a prehistoric matriarchal society.” 108 Childbirth was a central component of celebration of the female body but in reality, the actual child was not part of the celebration.

As well as occurred with Mierle Laderman Ukeles, it is telling that Judy Chicago, one of the founders of the Women’s Building that created a large-scale tapestry series on childbirth, said another mother artist - Helen Million Ruby - that she had to choose between her children and her art, believing that she was only stating a fact instead of giving an ultimatum. 109

Inside the artist’s studios of the Woman’s Building dogs but no children were allowed, 110 to which the group Mother Art responded placing a playground, “Rainbow Playground” (1974), in front of the building, in the parking lot.

This first installation discussed the lack of support women faced inside and outside the art world, as well as the contradictions between motherhood and feminism.

The members of Mother Art have changed since its creation. The first members were Christy Kruse, Helen Million, Suzanne Siegel, and Laura Silgali. Gloria Hajduk also worked with the collective for the intervention in the Women’s Building, as well as Velene Campbell Kessler joined the group for “Laundry Works” (1977).

Nowadays the group is compound by Deborah Krall, Suzanne Siegel and Laura Silagi.

108 Ibid. p. 2.
109 Ibid.
The second project of Mother Art for the Woman’s Building was to organize the exhibition “By Mothers” in 1975 with the intent to demonstrate that motherhood was a legitimate subject for feminist art. By the time of the second exhibition “By Mothers” in 1976, same year of Adrienne Rich’s influential publication “Of Woman Born”, the exhibition was intended to include positive as well as negative aspects of motherhood. In their call for submissions Mother Art encouraged work that explored “the pain, anxiety, anger and guilt of mothers” together with “the delight, the strength, the care in nurturing.”

Silagi characterized them as “grotesque, not sentimental... ironic... opposed to anything romanticized... humorous, although some of them are very sweet.”

For the exhibition Gloria Hajduk created “Application for Prospective Mothers”, a series of thirty questions as if they were applying for a job. Initially Mother Art focused in gaining greater visibility for mother artist and in a second phase the group used the mother as trope through which explore the devaluated women’s contribution to society. Their project “Laundry Works”(1977) is a series of site-specific performances in Laundromats throughout Los Angeles. In the performances the group hung art and poetry, and discussed with women that attended the place to do their laundry about the work involved in domestic tasks.

Marked by the rhythm of the machines’ washing cycles, the performances pointed this way to the particular time distribution of domestic labors in which women were embedded. The always-rushed-like time of the performances, which were reduced to a single washing-and-dry cycle, recreated the lack of time for mothers who worked, and aimed to discuss the topic inside the artistic scenario for mother artists.

The project received 700 dollars in funding from a California Arts Council grant. To this fact referred the ex-Governor Ronald Reagan in an article published in the Los Angeles Time in 1978, exemplifying the waste in government spending.

“Mother Art” responded to ex-Governor statements performing “Mother Art Cleans Up the Banks” and “Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall”, “where the artists dusted and scrubbed these buildings, simultaneously creating commentary on real fiscal waste and articulating the powerful bonds between women’s domestic and public spaces.”

In Michelle Movarec’s words: “if I have learned anything from the members of Mother Art, or feminists of the 1970s in general, it is that I must exploit (...) contradiction (as a mother), not avoid it.”

The group Mother Art kept working during the 1980s in the debate about war, homelessness among women, and the devastation on women’s bodies from illegal abortions.
North American artist Ree Morton’s artistic career began late in life. After studying to be a nurse and dedicating her life to her husband and children, by the year of 1970 when she got her master’s degree in fine art, that same year her work was included in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s Contemporary American Sculpture Annual.

In “Maternal Instincts” (1974) a banner of celastic with the title of the work forms an arc over three flags containing the first initials of each of her three children’s name, illuminated by three light bulbs.

Morton’s anti-monumental oeuvre celebrates, however, the intimacies of daily life in a tone that can evoke a children’s party or a small town’s parade.
Feminist theorist Laura Mulvey and filmmaker Peter Wollen produced the film, “Riddles of the Sphinx”, London, 1977, in which Mulvey theorized the concept of the phallic gaze in relationship to film. In form of essay the film displays different languages like Mulvey reading about feminism, as well as the description of Louise’s life with a constant moving camera, and additionally, a colorful experimentation with images of a woman on a trapeze, written reflections at the beginning of each section, and at the end of the film a golden mercury-like fluid is reunited with another portion in the middle of a blue labyrinth.

In the first section of seven, Mulvey connects motherhood with the role of the Sphinx. In her words:

To the patriarchy the Sphinx, as a woman is a thread and a riddle.
We live in a society ruled by the father, in which the place of the mother is suppressed.
Motherhood and how to live it, or not to live it, lies at the roots of the dilemma.
And meanwhile, the Sphinx can only speak with a voice apart, a voice off.

In another section, a single mother, Louise, is shown with her daughter Anna and at work, facing the struggles of the working mother at the end of the 70s. With a continuous 360-degree camera pan the spectator is immersed in an unstable and in-constant-change world.

At the minute 42 Louise’s thoughts ask in voice off:

Should women demand special working conditions for mothers? Can a child-care campaign attack anything fundamental to women’s oppression? Should women’s struggles be concentrated on economic issues? Is domestic labour productive? Is the division of labor the root of the problem? Is exploitation outside the home better than oppression within it? Should women organise themselves separately from men? Could there be a social revolution in which women do not play the leading role? How does women’s struggle relate to class struggle? Is patriarchy the main enemy for women? Does the oppression of women work in the unconscious as well as on the conscious? What would the politics of the unconscious be like? How necessary is being-a-mother to women, in reality or imagination? Is the family an obstacle to the liberation of women? Is the family needed to maintain sexual difference? What other forms of childcare might there be? Are campaigns about childcare a priority for women now?

In the shape of a poem, another scene reflects on Louise’s life at Anna’s bedtime. The minimalistic poem is heard in a voice off over a similar minimalistic music:

Distressed. Strained. Nesting. In the nest. Comfort. Effort. At the breast. At rest. Resting. Take leave. Take moss. Be close. Be clasped and cleft. Be close. Nesting. Acquiesced. Memory. Mystery. Dispossessed. Depressed. Trusting. Make cross. Make grieve. Morose. Subject to conquest. Object to incest. Nesting. From the nest. Blood. Brood. From the breast. Caressed. Hurting. Bleeding. It was obvious. It was as obvious as oblivious. Brooding. It was plain. Be close. It was as plain as it was pain. Make love. Make grieve. Marries. Mother’s and another’s. Mysteries. Nesting. “If only I hadn’t minded”, I used to say, but I did mind very much. I minded more than very much. I minded more than I could ever have dared. Mind the door. Mind the glass. Mind the fire. Mind the child. I never minded the warmth. I minded the need. “It was needed to have minded”, I used to say, but was it needed to have minded more than very much? More than I could ever have dared?

“Riddles of the Sphinx” (1977) is an iconic film on motherhood as it brings together many theoretical as well as aesthetical references regarding feminism and motherhood, like for instance at one scene, Louise’s ex-husband asks her them to watch a film he is editing in which Mary Kelly appears reading about the problems she is having with her son going to nursery school.

German artist Anna Oppermann produced a vast series of “Ensembles” during 1968 until her death in 1993. Her reflections on gender depicted in her work made her be initially criticized as a “mediocre painter of sterile, domestic still lifes.”

In her work, Oppermann dealt not only with gender issues, but also with the complex relation of art and market, as for instance in the works "MSSVO- "Make Small, Straightforward, Vendible Objects!"(1979-1992) and "Gesture of Pathos –MLCODP- "Make Large, Compelling Objects that Demonstrate Power!"(1984-1992) which was presented in its complete form at the Documenta 8 in 1987, decade in which her work was widely exhibited.

In the many layers inside or outside the photographs, the many pieces and texts of Oppermann’s Ensembles, contrary to an invasion to the spectator, he or she finds the freedom to wander freely and look for meanings in the concrete abstraction of Oppermann’s open proposal.

The chaotic form of Anna Oppermann’s Ensembles constitute an accurate description of the maternal condition where an ordered mess reigns, and whose spontaneity is impossible to reproduce outside life itself, as later attempts of re-exhibiting Anna Oppermann’s work have shown.

In this regard discusses Ute Vorkoeper in “After ‘The Death of the Author’. On Re-installing Anna Oppermann’s Processual and Open Ensembles”(2006) about not only the difficulty of dealing with the many elements on reinstalling Oppermann’s work, as furthermore Vorkoeper openly discusses her problems with the small parts of the Ensemble, and the lack of documentation on how to be mounted. The result of her work led to a more ordered reconstructed version of the Ensemble "Embraces, Inexplicables, and a Line of Poetry by R.M.R"(1977-1992) that the curator and her curatorial group reconstructed in 1993 in the Sprengel Museum Hannover, were they covered a surface of approximately 430cm high and 660cm and 600cm wide, with 18 hung photo canvases and about 500 small pieces discharged onto the floor.

For Vorkoeper: “our reinstallation in the end was a bit too clean, too proper. Nevertheless, everybody was quite happy because nobody had thought before that reinstallation would work at all.”

The Ensemble “Embraces, Inexplicables, and a Line of Poetry by R.M.R”(1977-1992) above referred, deals directly with motherhood, as well as with women’s roles, pregnancy, immaculate conception, breast and nipple, among other subjects, as described by Herbert Hossmann in his index of Oppermann’s Ensembles.

In “Embraces”(1977-1992), a multiplied photograph of an embraced pregnant belly is placed next to few red tomatoes, some red paper windows, as well as some placement tape crosses; all inside and outside photographs, and also different abstractions of a woman holding or embracing (a baby?) and plenty of written notes. All very reddish, more like a view from inside the womb, than the altars for African Orishas that Oppermann’s work with the common white tablecloth seems to evoke.

Oppermann’s Ensembles expect to impress no one. The freedom of their language come from her self-declared position of outsider, constituting this way a positive acceptance of the dualisms and oppositions, and this furthermore works as an accurate representation of mothering in its struggle to reconcile the mother’s various selves, resisting the imposition of the “master discourses” of the patriarchal institution that demands clarity and certainty of mothering practices. In both a conscious mothering and Oppermann’s work trial and error find place.

In the Ensemble “Embraces”(1977-1992) Oppermann quotes the first lines of the Duinese Elegies by Rainer Maria Rilke:

Who if I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders? And even if one of them suddenly pressed me to his heart: I should fade in the strength of his much stronger existence. For beauty’s nothing but the beginning of terror which we, barely able to endure, actually adore, because it so serenely disdains to destroy us.

In the poem, in general terms, there is a reference to the act of being embraced as the own defeat by the other’s beauty and strength that is being addressed in relation to the “angelic orders”, but also constitutes the image of the mother when consoling her child, and his/her final pleasure in being destroyed by her embracement.

The photographs of the Ensemble “Embraces”(1977-1992) were produced in collaboration with Martin Kippenberger, and the Ensemble draws on Oppermann’s time at the Villa Romana, Italy, during the years 1977 and 1978.

As described by Herbert Hosmann, Oppermann’s Ensembles follow the thematic categories of the situation of an artist, wife, and mother of a young child in the late 1960s; as well as positions in the world and relationships with other people (like being an outsider, love, friendship, enmity, career); portraits of colleagues and friends; the specific conditions of being an artist as well as the economic, social, and psychological preconditions for making, selling and communicating art; and finally, the rigorous aesthetic, philosophical, and intellectual inquiry.
Moreover, the drawing of the snow-white marble Madonna del Latte, that in Oppermann’s words “smiles while nursing her fat, greedy, demanding child, but one also sees a little bit of the evil sharp teeth of a predator (or am I imagining that?)”. This interpretation adds depth to the complexity of the subject of motherhood and its contradictions, what is ultimately represented in Oppermann’s artistic work.

Finally, there is a repeated element that is a plasticine anonymous figure, similar to a person, which holds another figure (a baby?). Both are faceless and sexless. The embraced figure is the “Venus” by Boticelli, cut out of a postcard and presented with its back to the viewer. –Image 1 above-

In the drawn version of the plasticine figure –Image 2 above- it is possible that the handwritten addition on this drawing refers to R. D. Laing’s book “Knoten” that is multiple times quoted. In the book Laing states: “Jack wants to devour his mother and be devoured by her”. In the same direction Oppermann’s writing reads: “fear of being devoured”.

Anna Oppermann’s Ensembles additionally relate to esoteric themes such as Castaneda, angels, devil, hell, sin, crucifixion, altar, adoration, blasphemy, immaculate conception, temptation, sacrificial and blessed lamb, and meditation. The inclusion of such subjects enriches the many layers of her inspiring work, as they constitute a view on the beliefs that took over the seventies, the same as Nikki de Saint Phalle, whose work will be later further discuss.

128 http://www.uni-lueneburg.de/hyperimage/HI_Umarmungen/#!/a2_9_VD_1/

129 http://www.uni-lueneburg.de/hyperimage/HI_Umarmungen/#!/a2_3_1/

Another work dealing with the subject of motherhood is “Discours Mou et Mat” (1975) or “Soft and Dull Speech” in English, of French artist Gina Pane.

In the 22:23 minutes video, Gina Pane enters a gallery dressed typically in white and wearing sunglasses. The audience, after sidestepping a motorcycle blocking the gallery entrance, is waiting. In the room a series of elements are displayed such as boxing gloves, a motorcyclist helmet and a brass knuckle.

In the following six scenes, the artist slips into different roles: the protective figure of the mother, the trauma of separation at birth, the alienation of the newborn baby from its mother, as well as closeness, intimacy and desire. All the while, Pane handles the objects with a kind of poetry, lending them symbolic value through the repetition of her movements, the inclusion of music, the reading of texts and the projection of slides.

On the other hand Gina Pane’s performances explored the element of self-infringed cuts, through which she expected to awake society from a lethargy that strongly affected women. The incisions made with razor blades on the tongue and lips marked the impossibility of talking, suffered by women who were furthermore Pane’s privileged receptors.

Gina Pane’s work represents the rebellion against the body’s social domestication. At the same time that Pane showed that the contact and the affectionate relation mother/child could result asphyxiating for the progeny, as the work “Embrace” of Anna Oppermann also discussed.

On the other hand, Gina Pane’s homosexuality was openly assumed. It is for this reason that we believe it is additionally important to include her approach in this research, as Pane represents an early queer perspective on the subject of motherhood.

In 1975 Pane declared that the mother symbolized constriction, suffocation and death, showing this way her discomfort in face of the sacred traditional family, which at another level has been a general claim of the gay movement that is furthermore represented in Pane’s work.

135 Ibid.

Significantly, Gina Pane’s work stands in accordance to what Adrienne Rich stated in the introduction of the 10th anniversary of her book “Of Women Born” (1976), regarding the significant amount of gay women hiding in heterosexual marriages during the 60’s and 70’s.

To her concrete poetry Polish artist Ewa Partum included the work “Poem by Ewa” (with Baby Berenika) (1974). Partum’s early works were meta-poetries, in which she spilled letters on paper in public urban spaces and her motto was “an act of thought is an act of art.”

In her desire to create a new language for art and construct a transparent expression, with “Poem by Ewa” (with Baby Berenika) (1974) Partum inscribed motherhood in the realm of matter for art come from her personal life, as the photograph of “Poem by Ewa” (with Baby Berenika) (1974) corresponds to her baby Berenika born the year the visual poem was created.
Another artist who during the decade of 1970s depicted babies clothing to illustrate the demanding maternal work was Elaine Reichek. In her series “Laura’s Layette”(1975-1976), Reichek placed two canvases together where on the left side complex diagrams instruct how to knit the minuscule piece on the right.

In the series is depicted all that the artist’s daughter Laura wore in their way home from the hospital. Reichek’s early work is a formal question about the line, which is translated here to the thread. In the artist’s words the three-part work “is connected to an infant’s growth and development”.137

In “Direction/Translation/Operation”(1979) a child’s development is portrayed through the different mittens wore through each phase. The series describes one of the earliest developmental stages for primates through the “operation” of learning to grab, which is first absent, as increasingly the child learns to grip with the thumb, to finally use all the fingers.

Moreover, the series insists in the invisibilized and complex mother’s labor, lying behind the culturally supposed simplicity of childcare.

German artist Ursula Reuter Christiansen’s work was influenced and embodies the feminist slogan “the personal is political”.

In the film “The Executioner”(1971) Reuter Christiansen tells the story of a woman whose life is transformed by marriage and childbirth. According to the database of women artists Clara, though she was highly criticized for her portrayal of the woman as a victim of the traditional patriarchal ideal of femininity, Reuter Christiansen was using her own experiences as a new mother and wife to comment on social realities.138

According to Doris Berger “when it was made the film was read as a counterpoint to activist feminist, although (the artist) was herself involved in feminist groups.”139

As in many of Reuter Christiansen’s work from the period, the film combines mythological symbols linked to the artist’s own life, in order to universalize the female experience.

In the film, the main character is played by Reuter Christiansen pregnant of her second child, and depicts the loss of freedom. At the same time that the film points to the contradictions of the female power concerning their connection with nature and an exhortation for women to take hold of their lives and history.140

137 http://elainereichek.com/Project_Pages/16_EarlyKnit/EarlyKnittedWork.htm
139 Ibid
140 Ibid
The decision of making North American artist Faith Ringgold part of this text acknowledges what seems to be a lack of African-descendant artists dealing with the subject of motherhood. Although it is known that the Black Power approached feminism as part of its cause, it is however necessary a more exhaustive mapping to recognize what female black artists have produced on the subject of motherhood.

In this direction motherhood from the third-world women’s experience, or different than one white, middle class, young and heterosexual, has not just been kept silent, but it simply has not even made part of the discussion. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s reflects:

Can the subaltern speak? What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? The question of „woman” seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways.141

Ringgold’s presence here does not alleviate the impression that the topic of motherhood in the art world was initially formalized through the different positions of white women, except for few exceptions.

In 1970, Ringgold’s interest in feminism was declared, motivated by a maternal approach as her desire was to help her “daughters, other women and (her)self aspire to something more than a place behind a good man.”142

That same year Ringgold and her daughter organize the group Woman Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation, to protest war, sexism and racism.

In 1971 Ringgold produced a large mural installed at the Women’s House of Detention on Riker’s Island on New York, and as part of her artistic work Ringgold has also produced a series of acclaimed children books, like “Tar Beach”(1988) and “My Dream of Martin Luther King”(1995).

However, in Ringgold’s late works like “A Family Portrait”(1997)—Image 1 above- and “Moroccan Holiday”(1997)—Image 2 above- the subject of motherhood is significantly reflected. In “A Family Portrait”(1997) the mixed races of North American families is portrayed, and in a text that accompanies “Moroccan Holiday”(1997) Ringgold declares:

Being here with you Marlena, my darling daughter, is a true Moroccan holiday. I have just completed these paintings of four great men in our history. A gift for you, my love, to celebrate our women’s courage. Had I been born a man I would have been just like them. It is their courage that will not allow me to be a victim, Marlena. Never be a victim, Marlena. Never never, Marlena.143


North American Artist Martha Rosler produced in 1975 the work “Semiotics of the Kitchen” in which she illustrates the alphabet with kitchen implements when existing, and thus for the letters U, V, W, X, Y, and Z, instead of showing a tool, Rosler gesticulates.

In the beginning of the six minutes video¹⁴⁴ there is a slow strange mood in the host of this “cook show” that evolves to violence when it is the time for the “Fork”, the “Ice Pick” and the “Knife”. By the time of the “Ladle”, the “Spoon” and the “Measuring Implements” the instruction regarding the use of the utensils consists in throwing the food away, silly or violently, or simply out of frustration. As with the “Opener” begins an exaggerated force to be infringed to the implement.

At the end of the video the final gesture of the host comprises an almost provocative question to the audience: “Yes, and?”

Although Rosler is known to be a mother and a strong feminist, it is known that she does not like to take part of the mother-artist section, as she does not want to be classified. Her work however is a good example of the many in which the element of the kitchen is analyzed, which constitutes a direct reference to motherhood.

¹⁴⁴ Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zSA9Rm2PZA. Retrieved 02.01.2015

German artist Ulrike Rosenbach created a vast series of works exploring the relationship between mother and child since the decade of 1970s.

About the first work with her five years old daughter, “Wrapping with Julia” (1972), Rosenbach affirms:

My little daughter sits on my lap. Accompanied by the musical sounds of breathing, I tie us together with transparent gauze bandages. We are in any case inseparably joined.¹⁴⁵

According to the online database Re.Act.Feminism in “Wrapping with Julia” “interweaving, symbiosis and the blurring of boundaries, but also control and restriction, are important themes.”¹⁴⁶

Another Rosenbach’s work addressing the subject of motherhood is the four minutes video “Mutterliebe” –Mother Love– (1977). The work reflects on the immeasurable maternal love and its marks. For journalist Kirsten Eisenberg, the video-installation shows a mother while repeatedly kisses her daughter until she opens up a wound on her cheek.

In the video the passive and tolerant attitude of Julia, whose only movement is her eyes’ natural blinking, in combination with the proximity of the camera and her image in a close up, creates an almost asphyxiating effect, as if she were the victim of her mother’s affection and artistic work.

To this series also belong the performances “Salto mortale” (1978) as well the video “Kleine Stücke für Julia” or “Small Pieces for Julia” (1979).

In “Salto Mortale” (1978) photographs of women from different social standings hang from the ceiling. On the floor lies a circle of salt, divided by a reflecting foil. The surface of salt is dispersed by the artist’s skirt, as she swings on top, in a trapeze. The element of the trapeze is here also explored like in Laura Mulvey’s film “Riddles of the Sphinx” (1977) and remains close to the swing of Tina Keane in “Swing” (1978), to which we would like to add that its use is problematic as it depicts women as children, being the infantilization of women one of the biggest struggles of the feminist movement.

In the 30 minutes performance Rosenbach holds a camera that records thus swinging images. In the background, in front of the photographs, Rosenbach’s daughter, Julia, observes.

The work “Narzissen Scheiden Weg” (1980) –image above- deals with the subject of separation between mother and child, a subject also addressed by Kelly and Laderman Ukeles.

147 http://www.ulrike-rosenbach.de/index_01.htm, Retrieved 30.10.14
And finally, the series of works assessing the relationship mother and daughter concludes with “Wechselfrau im Spiegelbild” or “Changing Woman in Reflected Image” in 1981. The catalogue of the performance reads:

It’s about growing and changing to another lifetime. The young girl stands on the threshold of womanhood, the mother on the threshold of mature woman. The artist marked the transformation by smearing a huge mirror surface with opaque grease. The daughter sits on the floor before it and writes with the same fat a quote about growth from „Alice in Wonderland” on a large round mirror. Scratching noises that associate the ambivalence of mirrors and ice accompany the action.¹⁵¹

The performance calls to attention the social imperative to stay young as a woman, and thus be always available for men or to be, in general, ready to consume, whilst the mother is contradictorily expected to give her place to the teenage daughter, being sent to disappear in the background.

Finally, it is important to mention here that the personal aspect of Ulrike Rosenbach’s late conversion to Islam seems to obscure her early abundant reflection on feminism and motherhood.


After a severe nervous breakdown, in 1962 French artist Niki de Saint Phalle began to produce what by 1965 would be three-dimensional female figures.

Out of a desire to enter a “more interior feminine world,”¹⁵² these “Nanas” (1965-74) had the shape of voluptuous women in suggestive positions, colored with vivid polyester or paper-mâché.

In 1966 Saint Phalle installs a sculpture in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. This monumental reclining “Nana” was 28 meters long, 9 meters wide and 6 meters high and is called “Hon” (the Swedish pronoun, “she”).¹⁵² The sculpture took the form of a pregnant woman lying on her back with her knees raised and was entered through the vaginal opening that led to a variety of entertainments like a Planetarium in the left breast, a milk bar in the right breast, that was also equipped with a kinetic sculpture that smashed empty bottles. In the left arm a small movie theater continually screened “Luftarpetters” of Greta Garbo and in the left leg a gallery of fake paintings was located. On a band around the right leg was painted: “Honi soit qui mal y pense” that in 1348 was in use and translated “shamed the person that thinks evil of it.”¹⁵³ The installation counted with a terrace atop the belly, and a head filled with a moving brain. For Saint Phalle, as for many visitors, “Hon” represented the return to the Great Mother.

However, as it was discussed previously in relation with Anna Oppermann’s work, even though the back-to-nature ethic of the time was the beginning of environmentalism, the discourse of the Mother Earth

¹⁵² http://www.nikidesaintphalle.com, Retrieved 30.10.14
that Nikki de Saint Phalle approached stayed in the beauty of the hippie movement typical of the 1960s and 1970s and evolved later in the direction of esotericism.

Saint Phalle’s late work seems to depict the folklore of the sixties and seventies and found its place in decorative sculptures and thematic parks.

In a much smaller dimension, Niki de Saint Phalle addressed the subject of the relationship between mother and child in one of her serigraphs “Dear Laura, a letter” (1982) of 52 x 73,3 cm. The serigraph points out the hurried life of the artist and the lack of time for her children, as “Dear Laura, a letter” (1982) is an answer to a letter Laura wrote to ask for more time from her mother.

The serigraph reads:

Dear Laura. Hello. Many thanks for your letter. I’m tired. How can I in one day find enough time?
1. To play and be with the children at least 4 hours a day
2. I do most of the cooking 1½ hours. Helmut does some of it but you should all see the mess he leaves the kitchen in
3. Do exercise. ½ hour before breakfast
4. Breathe and meditate for another ½ hour
5. My five day a week 5 hour a day job
6. Clean the house ½ hour. I do the minimum
7. Have bread, wine, banana, orange. Share the shopping with Helmut ½ hour
8. Be a tantric goddess in bed with Helmut. Two hours or 3 or 4
9. Iron. 20 minutes a day
10. Speak to my friends at least 30 minutes (or see them which takes much longer)
11. Wash my hair and make up. 20 minutes
12. Two hours at least read. Listen to music (as much as possible)

My new year’s resolution:
1. Stop being my children’s maid. They are 8 and 10. I will teach them to cook, clean and wash their clothes. And iron. Be survivors!
2. Get Helmut to help more and gamble less.

Much love from your harried but happy friend-Mary

Zorka Saglova produced in 1970 “Laying Napkins near Sudomer”, where the artist laid out approximately 700 napkins to form a triangle on a grass field near Sudomer, the site of an infamous Hussite battle in 1420. The action referred to local folklore relating how Hussite women spread pieces of cloth on a marshy field to obstacle the spurs of the Roman Catholic cavalymen as they dismounted, making them easy targets for the Hussite warriors.154

Beginning in the late 1960s, Saglova was one of the first artists to work in the landscape outside Prague, carrying out actions with her friends, many of whom were part of the artistic underground in then Communist Czechoslovakia.155

In “Laying Napkins near Sudomer” the artist uses the pictorial language of her paintings based on geometric forms and uniform color fields. But she also deals with the domestic and mostly feminine activities transferring them to a public place charged with historical reference.156

On the other hand the intervention approaches the domestic position of the mother and wife who is in charge of her family and takes care of it from a powerless position. The element of the napkins could thus be easily replaced by the controversial element of the nappies used by artists such as Mary Kelly, Mierle Lederman Ukele and María Evelia Marmolejo.

In her performance, Saglova recreates the complex and contradictory relations woven between motherhood and war as described by Sara Ruddick in “Maternal Thinking. Towards a Politics of Peace.” 157

According to Ruddick, there are two main positions in the relation of mothers with war. The first one is “women’s politics” in which women embrace their cultural role as mothers in charge of their children like are the groups “Kinder, Küche und Kirche” (Children, Kitchen and Church) who served the military Nazi state as the Nazi women joined together to mourn their sons’ lost, as well as today in

154 http://www.moca.org/landart/
155 Ibid.
157 Ruddick, Sara (1989)“Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace”, Beacon Pr. p. 222-244
Chile a women’s organization under the direction of the dictator Pinochet’s wife celebrate the “feminine power” through the loyalty to family and fatherland. It has been described in Dorothy Dinennstein’s words as:

The absurd self-importance of his striving has been matched by the abject servility of her derision, which has on the whole been expressed only with his consent and within boundaries set by him, and which has on the whole worked to support the stability of the realm he rules.158

But also, in this first group there is a movement of resistance like for instance the Argentinian groups “Mothers” and “Grandmothers” of the “Plaza de Mayo” and the Chilean group of women that united against military dictatorship, specifically kidnapping, imprisonment, torture and murder of the “disappeared”. These groups held actions like marching wearing white kerchiefs with the names of the disappeared on them, as well as hold candles and always carried the picture of their lost relative. In Chile women chained themselves to the steps of the capitol, formed a human chain to the mine Lonquen were a mass grave was discovered and took over a stadium where the disappeared were present before being tortured and killed.159

For Andrea O’Reilly these women acted from a feminist viewpoint although for them feminism “connoted women who spurned tradition, bashed men, acted like men, or maybe even wanted to be men, but in any case their demands for equality had to do with upper-class women.”160

The fact that these women did not identify themselves as feminists opens a new discussion on feminism and the lack of artistic production made by third world women in this regard, which we will discuss in Chapter III.

The second position of women in relation with war is “feminist politics” where the gender division of life is questioned but where also takes place a feminist women’s militarist politics where the feminist soldier heroine “may be most perfectly represented by a young woman with a baby in her arms and a gun over her shoulder.”161

As well as a second feminist position where for Ruddick, like in the women’s politics of resistance, feminism shifts the balance of maternal militarism “from denial to lucid knowledge, from parochialism to awareness of others’ suffering and from compliance to stubborn.”162 Which can transform maternal practice into a work of peace as, in her words “to be a feminist mother is to recognize that many dominant values –included but not limited to the subordination of women- are unacceptable and need not to be accepted,” widening the maternal non-violence to all areas of life.

Saglova’s work is thus from this perspective an example of the role played by mothers in the course of history and in relation with war, as in the intervention the role of the women is described as an active supporter to war, at the same time that it arises a question regarding the promise of birth that violence destroys.

158 Ibid. p. 224
159 Ibid. p. 227-228
161 Ibid. p. 235
162 Ibid. p. 236
163 Ibid. p.238
164 http://www.helke-sander.de/biography/
Sander epitomizes the difficult position in which women artists of the contemporary scenario find themselves.

With a reduced income in comparison to our male mates, as in the film it is described how the price awarded to Edda and her female colleagues was reduced to the less than the half because of the mere fact that they were women; another problematic faced in the film is the constant abuse typical of the creative areas where an unclear gift economy prevails, which leads to Edda’s pictures being often published without a credit and thus without payment. A situation to which Edda could not fight directly.

In the film, Dorothea, Edda’s daughter, is not the only child present. There is also Tarzan, the son of another colleague photographer of Edda.

Among other difficulties described in the film, Sander uses the presence of the children to illustrate the abyss that divides mothers from single women and not only inside Edda’s group: it is impossible to left the children alone when the father cannot take care of them, as it is the mother the final receptacle of this ultimate responsibility, being her who becomes the lightning rod of aggressions when children are present in situations where they are not allowed.

With no little bitterness, nor sense of black humor, Edda and her single colleague without children steal and eat Tarzan’s candy when his mother takes him upstairs, after a discussion about Tarzan’s surprising presence.

Another example of the inconvenience of a family life in relation with work is the emblematic scene of Dorothea not wanting her mother to go to work in the first five minutes of the film.

At the end of the scene, Dorothea is left with her mother’s scarf that she would not let go in order to make her mother stay.

In the same direction the film ends with the voice off: “We don’t always notice the times we live in. So we go forward, bit by bit. Feet on the ground, head in the clouds”, as otherwise without any of these conditions we would not be able to go on.

Edda and Dorothea meet by chance on the street, each on her way to their lives. Edda gives Dorothea bread, and they keep their way, without having more time to one another, heartbreakingly.

Inside the film are quoted the films “Invisible Adversaries”(1976) of VALIE EXPORT, “Film About a Woman Who...” of Yvonne Rainer, and “The Executioner”(1971) of Ursula Reuter-Christiansen that breaks with the documentary tone of the movie, as they are displayed at the same time, on a newspaper that Edda grabs to read and rest from her exhausting work. The quotation is announced as: “Obsessed by everyday life, as seen by other women.”

Sander’s viewpoint on the life of a woman who works inside the creative field in West Berlin seems too close not to be our present time: social insecurity, loneliness, bitterness, need to play an ultimate responsibility, being her who becomes the lightning rod of aggressions when children are present in situations where they are not allowed.

The seductive idea of disappearing as a species has been dreamt by plenty of authors from Tolstoi to Otto Weiniger, as well as the writer Fernando Vallejo, among others.

This proposal appears as sexy as it has cooperated with the denigration of the labor of care and with the misogyny that women have ultimately internalized.

To this we add that this perspective can be as well an installed effect of the bourgeoisie, as in Marx terms the family relation has turned into a pure money relation, and this nihilistic approach to life encloses the danger of denying the political struggle for a better life by denying life itself.

On the other hand, Sander’s filmography continued to insist on the female condition and the problematic approach to motherhood during and after the decades of 1960s and 1970s in Berlin.

Such is the case of “Aus Berichten der Wach-und Patrouillendienst nr 1.”(1984), or “From Reports of Security Guards and Patrols Services”, which constitutes a modern Medea of precariousness as during the 11 minutes film a mother is shown in her fight for an affordable apartment where to live with her two children.

In the film the woman and her two children climb to the end of a crane’s arm and threatens to jump if by the evening she is not fixed with a solution. The film was based on a report of security guards.

Similarly, the late films “Mutterter-Muttermensch” or “Animal Mother - Human Mother”(1998) and “Mitten in Malestream” or “In the Middle of the Malestream. Disputes on strategy in the new women’s movement”(2005) in which motherhood is discussed, either during a set of interviews as in “Animal Mother - Human Mother”(1998), or in “In the Middle of the Malestream”(2005), in a panel discussion where the subject is documented.

“In the Middle of the Malestream”(2005) discusses the discrimination suffered by women during the sixties and seventies for the fact that they were mothers, as it was fascist to say mother and it had to be changed for “women with children”. In the panel is stated how during the emergence of feminism in Germany it was allowed to talk about abortion but not about having children, and motherhood was unattractive and old-fashioned which led to the contemporary phenomena of birth strike.

In the film the question is set: What would be so bad of disappearing as a species? To which we answer that it would be a response to unbearable life conditions, and not that we had reached our best evolutionary level.

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In her works "Maternity Dress" (1966) - Image 1 above - and "Knit Baby" (1968) - Image 2 above -, American artist Mimi Smith deals from two different perspectives with the subject of motherhood.

For Smith, "Maternity Dress" was produced as she was pregnant and thought that "it would be great to watch the children growing inside." 166

On the other hand, the dress is an abstraction of the pregnant body where the transparent semi-sphere reserved for the belly speaks not only about the delicate state of the fetus in constant exposure to dangers, but also the pregnant woman's fragility as she is constantly target of discrimination.

Similarly, in this direction pointed the works of Louise Bourgeois and Kirsten Justesen, as it was already mentioned.

During her second pregnancy, Smith produced the "Knit Baby Kit" (1968), as she thought that anyone, even men, could knit themselves a baby. The size of the knitted baby was the same as her son when he was born, and included instructions.

Unfortunately, the artist miscarried and had two subsequent miscarriages. For this reason, she embroidered "The Baby is Dead" on the little T-shirt of the "knitted baby."

By the time the "Knit Baby Kit" was shown, the interpretation was a feminist comment on motherhood, as if "motherhood was dead." 167

In Smith's words, these works need sometimes decades to be understood, as she sees the position that mother artists occupy nowadays inside the artistic institution as deteriorated.

For Smith:

(…) there is very little tolerance for mother-related art even among feminists, and when it is there, it is often said to be something else. Although there is some, very little is related to being a mother or becoming a mother. It is not considered smart or cool. Even historically the most painted maternal image, the religious one of the Mother and Child, was usually done by a man, and one of the women most known for painting mothers and children, Mary Cassatt, never had any. 168

167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
German artist Annegret Soltau produced a series of photo etchings during the time of her two pregnancies. “Schwanger” (1977-1982), or “Pregnant” in English (above), was produced because, in her words.

My pregnancies in 1978 and 1980 became an important theme for me. This personal experience yielded pictures in which I once again used myself as a model, this time myself in the process of being pregnant. The fear that my role as a mother could jeopardize my life as an artist inspired me to create many photos and videos. At this point I was preoccupied with the question of how women combine creativity and motherhood. 

The work comprises fifty-five images representing a body “literally reorganized by childbirth.” Furthermore, Soltau documented with video the changes her body underwent during her pregnancies.

In “Motherhood” (1977-1986) (above) Soltau stitches together pictures of her mother, son, daughter and herself, putting in a transcendental context the lineage, and thus approaching motherhood from the perspective of our pass in time and the active labor of mothers in history.

Some Mother Artists from 1980 to Date

We will as follow list some of the mother artists that have dealt with the subject of motherhood after 1970, this is, the period of time subsequent to the artworks related above in this Chapter.

In the decade of 1980 artists that have represented motherhood are (e.) Twin Gabriel and Ulf Wrede, Marian Kiss, Elisabeth Mackenzie, Rune Mielsd, Sherry Millner, Mother Art, Tyne Claudia Pollmann, Polvo de Gallina Negra, Aura Rosenberg, Blän Ryan, Judith Samen, Petra Seelenmeyer, Bettina Semmer, Lisa Steele.

In the decade of 1990 Iris Andraschek and Hubert Lobnig also developed a work on the subject of motherhood, as well as Camille Billops and James Hatch, Myrel Chernick, Renée Cox, Judith Hopkins, Jane Gallop and Dick Blau, Cheri Gaulke and Sue Maberry, M.A.M.A., Sally Mann, Cori Mercade, Ellen McMahon, Catherine Opie, Ngozi Onwurah, Sarah Pucill, Gal Reihan, Leslie Reid, and Barbara T. Smith.

The recent exhibition “New Maternalisms”, which took place in Toronto, in 2012, curated by Natalie Loveless was dedicated to the subject of motherhood and included the works of Lenka Clayton, Cheryl Dunye, Regina José Galindo, Masha Godovannaya, Beth Hall and Mark Cooley, Alejandra Herrera Silva, Lovisa Johansson, Alexandra Juhasz, Courtney Kessel, Hélène Malte, Gina Miller, Jill Miller, Dillon Paul and Lindsey Wolkoicz, Christine Pountney, Marlené Renaud-B, Victoria Singh and Alice De Visscher.

As well as the decade of 2000 also count with examples of artworks produced on the subject of motherhood by artist like Tina Bara, Eva Bertram, Monica Bock, Mariola Brillowska, Zofia Burr, Nicola Canavan, Elinor Carucci, Katharina Cibulka, Christen Clifford, Patricia Cué, Carola Dertnig, Erika Devries, Rachel Epp Buller, Denise Ferris, (e.) Twin Gabriel, Judy Gelles, Judy Glatzman, Heather Gray, Roesha Hamilton Metcalfe, Marlene Haring, Sibylle Hoffer, Jenny Holzer, Youngbok Hong, Rachel Howfield, Caroline Koebel, Käthe Kruse, Laura Larson, Hanna Lentz, Jumana Mannna, Ellen McMahon, Rune Mielsd, Margaret Morgan, Lindsay Page, Diana Quinby, Shelley Rae, Aura Rosenberg, Jenny Saville, Shelly Silver, Lena Šimić, Susanne Stövhase, Annelies Stibra, Païsa Tahgizadeh, Signe Theil, Sharon Thomas, Johanna Tuukkanen, Beth Worshafsky, Sarah Webb, Caroline Weihrauch, Ute Weiss-Leder, Kate Wilhelm, Marion Wilson, Jennifer Wroblewski and Silvia Ziranet.

To this ever-increasing amount of artworks depicting and reflecting on motherhood we ask how one of the aspects that intersects it, such as its commercial aspect, has marked their reception, and what implications can be thus inferred from the general situation of women artists.

Following, we will hence contextualize the artworks produced on the subject of motherhood inside the context of the art market.
Chapter II. Motherhood, the Others and their Market

The bodies of work of the decade of 1960 and 1970 that were previously presented, question the legitimacy of motherhood as a subject for art. Their reception counted with no few controversies in relation with the art market, which has extended to our current time. Such relations will be discussed in the current chapter.

These mother artists of the decade of 1960 and 1970 stood up to declare their private sphere as valid as any other political arena to be discussed in artworks, where the feminine world reacted to the roles that he patriarchal society imposed upon it.

The scenario they fought was one where few years before, in 1955, less than 25 percent of married women with children worked outside home; which rapidly changed over the course of 15 years to 40 percent in the 1970’s. For this reason it was important to begin addressing the intimate field of the mother and housewife whilst another bodies of work already reflect on the difficulties of working and being at the same time a mother.

This way, these series of works expose not only the daily routine of the artists that are also mothers, but furthermore bring out of silence many women’s invisibilized lives and their internal conflicts. Their greatest achievement is to have dared to speak from their own experiences, questioning the romanticized idea of motherhood depicted by outsiders, obtaining this way and for the first time a voice.

In Mary Kelly’s words:

Most women had children and their lives were totally determined by it, but if you look at art history, representations of the mother-child relationship were always from the point of view of an observer.175

Although this depicterialization of the female domestic labor was criticized to be a conservative reaction against women’s liberation movement, their position was actually pointing to a different problematic. The approach of these feminist mothers consisted in broadening the female spectrum of action and this way consider that from a feminist perspective it was also possible to be a mother, insisting this way in the need of reconsidering this emerging position.

The works previously discussed, added and keep adding gray tones to a polarized discussion in which, even nowadays, to have children equalizes to be traditional and patriarchal, as well as not to be serious about art.

According to Sharon Butler:

Women artists of the 1960s and 1970s gained exhibition opportunities and sexual freedom, but their political awakening only reinforced their disinclination to have children. At the same time, first-wave feminists recognized the importance of childbearing as a universal life experience that had been missing from male-dominated, Western art.176

Most of the artists previously presented in Chapter I embraced this position not just from a theoretical perspective, but also in their personal lives.

However, the work of contemporary mother artists is still nowadays being considered as too personal for the galleries.177 The reception of such works has not changed too much from the initial harsh critiques they received during the decades of 1960s and 1970s. In Butler’s words artworks depicting motherhood were not taken seriously as:

The accepted wisdom among the first generation of feminist artists who disdained baby-making was that women who reproduce spend at least a year or two making idiosyncratic, excessively inward-looking “baby art” and then, if they are lucky, eventually get their wits about them and return to their previous, more serious work. 174

On the other hand it has taken a surprising amount of time for motherhood to be regarded as a serious topic for feminists and feminist artists,175 making it clear that nowadays the personal is still political.176

Moreover, the works previously discussed embrace femininity with all its implications, bringing to reflection the partiality of our pass in the world as a species and thus insist in the still present need of politicize childrearing from a critical perspective, and contrary to the already existent use of motherhood as a means to control women.

Feminist mothers have insisted since the appearance of feminism in the danger of prevailing career upon personal life, as well as not having any career at all. But even nowadays feminist mothers are also considered that ask for too much when they express their will of having it all, this is, being mothers and having a career.

This has not been completely different in the art world.

For the case of the art market, the commodification of artworks has played a role that needs to be further analyzed.

As Isabelle Graw explains, the art market is a phantasmagorical net market based on communication, what makes it difficult to explain, predict and control.

The art market is at the same time one of the most speculative branches of our current economy, where its informality reminds mafia practices.177

For a long time there has been a prolonged silence inside the art market’s practices, as it seemed to be no real commodification from collectors and critics with the long time emerged voice of mother artists.

A few weeks ago the breaking news was the highest price a female artist’s work ever reached at an auction, like Louise Bourgeois’ “Spider” did in 2011. In this direction journalist Jonathan Jones declares to be no real identification from collectors and critics with the long time emerged voice of mother artists.

It is for these reasons that to discuss nowadays the work of the pioneer collective of mother artists is, in short, because of men like me. Art criticism defines the lofty peaks of the canon and it is, let’s say, a macho trade.”184

And of course it is clear that the harsh scenario on which mother artists work is the peak of the iceberg, 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.”185

And Andrea Liss complements this idea:

At stake in breaching this taboo and giving birth to a new provocation is recognizing that motherhood and women 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.186

As well as Liss brings to attention the fact that “public discussions of the dilemmas (faced by) artist-mothers unceasingly shield the “prolific artist” father who so graciously moves between the public and private realms.”187

Even though nowadays reconciling art and motherhood does not appear completely different than the scenario during the 1960s and 1970s, new many examples of mother artists insist in harmonizing the two aspects of life, as there is the case of an outstanding mother artist whose work depicting motherhood and birth is shown in the high-powered Saatchi and Gagosian galleries. This is the case of Jenny Saville who during the collapse of the economy in 2008 kept her work a blockbuster, demonstrating that it could be happening a slight change in the market, come from the longstanding mother artists’ struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Together with the fact that nowadays motherhood is a late event in life, Butler interprets:

The most important factor in elevating the status of baby art is that over the past decade or so, artists, including women, are achieving phenomenal success at much younger ages. Many artists now already have considerable traction in the art world by the time they have kids. And when important female artists have babies, their baby art can’t be dismissed by curators and furtively squirreled away in the flatfile.188

It is for these reasons that to discuss nowadays the work of the pioneer collective of mother artists of the decades of 1960 and 1970 helps to add a historical perspective to a problematic that should be now consider part of the past. As Butler notes:

As the taboo fades, the capacity to bear children and raise a family are now recognized as a source of unplumbed, original material. We’ve come a long way, baby.189

This is an optimistic perspective on which we would like to add that despite the few successful mother artists prior to 1960, mother artists of 1960 and 1970 did not face the best reception of their work, as well as the few examples of contemporary success do not necessarily mean that a bright future will yet arrive without struggling for it. As if women would have acquired all their rights through nothing but an extensive and sustained struggle.

In this respect we will further analyze in Chapter III the complexity of the historical relation woven between women and their economic environment.

184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid. p. 74
188 Ibid.
189 Ibid.
Chapter III. The Capital Problem

The artworks about motherhood compiled in Chapter I are not restricted to the artistic institution and thus related to its market as discussed in Chapter II, as, above all, they constitute a reflection on a broader structure where the position that women occupy in society is pinpointed.

In the following chapter we will analyze the problematics raised in the previous artworks from the perspective of a historical critique of the relation between women and Capitalism.

To do this we will base our approach mainly on the ideas of the Italian-American theorist Silvia Federici. This way we will deepen in the general history of Capitalism and locate the origin of the sentence to women to play a disadvantaged social and economic role.

Women’s confinement to domestic labor has been the result of our belittled position within every economic system.

In this respect, no attention has been captured by the greatest thinkers of Capitalism like Marx, as neither contemporary Negri and Hardt have discussed this aspect, constituting this way women’s labor the lowest grade in the proletariat’s precariousness scale.

The origin of such misplacement occurred in the early transition to Capitalism from Feudalism by the late Middle Ages. Between 1350 and 1500 an accumulation crisis forced the European states to adopt measures to protect markets, suppress competition and force people to work at the conditions imposed. Such conditions were registered as “work (that was) not worth the breakfast”.

In response to this crisis the European ruling class responded globally by laying the foundations of the capitalist-world system during 1450 to 1650, in an attempt to “appropriate new sources of wealth, expand its economic basis, and bring new workers under its command”; in a process whose pillars were described by Marx as “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in brief, force”.

As also Marx describes, in this initial process the chief moments of primitive accumulation consisted in

- The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, (of America), the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins.

Moreover, slavery was revitalized during the 15th century in Europe, giving the impression that the beginning of the capitalist development was an “immense concentration camp”. This process required the subjugation of women to the reproduction of the work-force and used the “Great Witch-Hunt” during the 16th and 17th centuries, as “most of all, it required the destruction of the power of women which, in Europe as in America, (was) achieved through the extermination of the ‘witches’.”

This way the proletariat women found the most radical differentiation from their male partners, whether in Europe or in America. In Europe the families disintegrated in the process where young men left, looking for jobs opportunities and leaving elder women behind to fend for themselves. The records of the witch-hunt show “quarrels relating to requests for help, the trespassing of animals, or unpaid rents were in the background of many accusations.”


192 Ibid.

193 Ibid. p.63

194 Ibid. p.63

195 Ibid. p.64

196 Ibid. p.63

197 Ibid. p.72
On the one hand women were more negatively affected as when the “land was privatized and monetary relations began to dominate economic life, they found it more difficult to support themselves, being increasingly confined to reproductive labor at the very time when this work was completely devalued.”

Their accumulation of capital became invisible, as their work was mystified as natural and labeled as “women’s labor”. In addition, women were excluded from many occupations and, when they worked for a wage they earned a “pitance” compared to the average male wage.

These changes peaked during the 19th century creating the full-time housewife, redefining women’s position in society and fixing them to reproductive work, but also increasing their dependence on men. This way the state and the employers were enabled to use the male’s wage as a means to command women’s labor.

Most importantly, the separation of production from reproduction created a class of proletarian women who was as dispossessed as men but, “unlike their male relatives, they had almost no access to wages, thus were forced into a condition of chronic poverty, economic dependence, and invisibility as workers.”

During the 17th century more than one food revolt were made up exclusively of women and women’s reproductive function was more strictly controlled by the European power-structure as the increasing privatization of property generated a new anxiety concerning the question of paternity and the conduct of women.

In addition, women were excluded from many occupations and, when they worked for a wage they earned as “women’s labor”.

European women had to face since 1450 the expansion of prostitution as their only source of possible income, as well as in the 17th century their jobs in midwifery and ale-brewing met new regulations and they had to carry jobs of the lowest status such as domestic servants (constituting 1/3 of female work-force), farmhands, spinners, knitters, hucksters, and wet nurses who refuse the work of reproducing ourselves and others (…) as workers, labour power, as commodities— as objects,” and they insisted on the idea that “women produce living individuals –children, relatives, friends– not labor-power,”

To which we add that men and women, alone or together in any possible combination, produce love-power and not labor-power, this is, the power of reproducing life itself without any other purpose than having a good life.

In this respect the political reflection of Mary Kelly’s early work “Night Cleaners” aimed to show that because of the sexual division of labor, the second shift of the women depicted in the film began after their work as cleaners ends. That is, the housework they performed at home lessened, this way, their leisure time, as their time was spent in a way opposed to their individual needs.

On the other hand, the women of the sixties went on rent strikes, welfare struggles, as well as in Silvia Federici, they struggled they “struggled to refuse the work of reproducing ourselves and others (…) as workers, labour power, as commodities— as objects,” and they insisted on the idea that “women produce living individuals –children, relatives, friends– not labor-power,”

In this scenario that we inherited our working conditions in which the employers invest every time less maintained as natural, both inside and outside our homes and work. This situation of the sixties showed that such investment did not improve the industrial productivity. This philosophy differs from the preceding working conditions, where the diminishment of the workers at the end of the 19th century forced the “capitalist class” to invest in life quality and in “reproduction of labor.”

This way, to fight nowadays for time and space to live a better life, whereas it is still possible to think about a family and/or explore all individual capacities alone, strikes the inherited working conditions that since the 1960s increasingly darken.

In the current scenario there is no time for leisure, and retirement has become a utopia, as it is stated in the film of Heike Sander “Redupers” analyzed in Chapter I, where the life situation of the main character is a good example of the insecure working conditions, more precisely inside the creative field.
where sick leave is inexistent and vacations happen every time less.

On the other hand, in the present time the continued crisis of the economy demands for new political approaches to redefine the place occupied by male and female labor, as well as the family, in the notion of the idea about love which “kept us warm during the depression” and that “we had better bring it with us on our present excursion into hard times.”

The idea of love here referred to has mainly with its political implications, as its politicization points to the right of having a decent life which is being asked to be included in the “commons” or the common resources that belong to all humankind and that must be available to any human being, thus it should be treated in accordance.

This struggle for a better life where love and childrearing find a space, takes place in a scenario of privatizations and corporate plunder of common resources, urging us to “re-appropriate the basic means of our subsistence.”

Although Capitalism and its lack of a plan led us to the dissolution of the traditional roles that were present in feudalism and that consisted in keeping women marginalized, as well as kept alive the promise of success to anyone who knows how to play with the rules of free entrepreneurship, the position occupied by women in these new conditions has been, however, not the same given to their male peers. The majority of women have been kept outside the game as historically we have been treated as children under the surveillance of male authorities and our economic relation woven with “Capital” has been mainly secluded to a limited range of action inside the household affairs.

In our current time women still earn not only less than our male partners, as it is well known that it takes us more effort to access jobs in relation to the time our male partners invest in education and general preparation to be able to access the same jobs.

As well as in a wider sense, women’s work has been considered not as good as the work produced by men, to which we have historically complied by thinking that we are never good enough. A situation that is described in Virginia Woolf’s words as “that deepseated desire, not so much that she shall be inferior as that she shall be superior.”

In such a discouraging scenario it is understandable that we have been limited to strongly consider dedicating our lives to our children and husbands, where at last we may find, within this reduced circle, appreciation; or at least to consider our career secondary in importance after our family.

These reasons are still present in the answer to the question “Why are Women Poorer than Men?” so well illustrated by Virginia Woolf, long ago in 1929. A discussion that can be updated combining the thoughts of Hans Abbing in his text “Why are Artists Poor?” and the reflection on the lack of opportunities for women in the art world, described in the text of 1971 “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” of Linda Nochlin. Ideas that finally make us wonder why nowadays are women artists poorer than men?

This question was approached in Chapter II but still needs to be further discussed.

On the other hand, to deal with this question face the absurdity of finding no one to blame, as for Deleuze and Guattari “there are no longer even any masters, only slaves commanding other slaves; there is no more need to burden the animal from the outside, it shoulders its own burden.”

Undone, its deterritorialization,” a world where there is “not at all a hope, but a simple “finding,” a “finished design.”

Moreover, Marshall Berman describes Capitalism as a complex economic system responsible for the greatest achievements of humankind, as well as, according to Berman, the always- unstable and chaos-driven economic system has also the potential to reunite us together to ultimately fight for better life conditions.

The positive achievements of the bourgeoisie are quoted in Berman from Marx, as it has “been the first to show what man’s activity can bring about (and has) accomplished wonders that far surpass Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, Gothic cathedrals.”

The bourgeoisie, in its reign of barely a hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive power than have all previous generations put together. Subjection of nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to agriculture and industry, steam navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground—what earlier century had even an intimation that such productive power slept in the womb of social labor?

Another positive aspect is added by Berman as he recognizes that the ruling class in capitalism has based its authority not on who their ancestors were, but on what they themselves actually do, proving that it is possible to really change the world.

On the other hand, capitalism can be a source of beauty and joy for all, as well as we are forced to face the real conditions of our lives and we will thus have the opportunity to overcome the cold that cuts through us all. But unfortunately, also in Berman’s words, Capitalism destroys the human possibilities that it creates, as the solid citizens that emerge from it would tear down the world if it paid, and this is precisely what we have seen that they have been doing efficiently.

This way, maybe a positive change is yet to come, as a product of the collective struggles for a better and fairer life for all that we seem to witness today, like the Occupy movements. Hoping that they prove to be profitable and this way a change finds the chance to take place.

From another perspective, inside the bourgeoisie the familiar cell is affected as in Marx words: “The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and turned the family relation into a pure money relation… In place of exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions, it has put open, shameless, direct, naked exploitation.”

As well as for Deleuze and Guattari in Capitalism (the alliances and filiations no longer pass through people but through money; so the family becomes a microcosm, suited to expressing what it no longer dominates (…) Father, mother, and child thus become the simulacrum of the images of capital (“Mister Capital, Madame Earth,”)

Similarly, for Deleuze and Guattari, in its process of Deteriorralization, the theater of production, which is the theater of cruelty, has been as destructive as liberating, producing a new land that is “not a promised and a pre-existing land, but a world created in the process of its tendency, its coming undone, its deteriorralization,” a world where there is “not at all a hope, but a simple “finding,” a “finished design.”


222 Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix (1972) Anti-Oedipus. University of Minnesota Press. p. 95

223 Nochlin, Linda (1971) Why There Have Been no Great W

224 ibid.


228 ibid.


230 ibid.

231 ibid.

232 ibid.

233 ibid. p.98

234 ibid. p.100

235 ibid. p.100

In these complex sets of relationships, where Marx believed that the doctor, man of science, lawyer, priest and the poet would not be affected by the need of selling their work,236 we need to locate care work, considering that it was left outside of any utopian escape from Capitalism, and was buried at the core of precariousness where it stayed until our present time. Despite being a work that would “pay to be paid” as it “helps to increase capital” in terms of Berman, due to constituting the basis of the work-force reproduction, care work has been made invisible.

At the same time, and not only for the feminists, “housewives (is) a fate which we all agree is, so to speak, worse than death.”240 In Federici’s thinking, the trap for the feminists is that “they know that this is the most powerless position in society and so they do not want to realise that they are housewives too (and this weakness, subsequently) is maintained and perpetuated through the lack of self-identification.”242

For this reason it is still crucial to discuss and thus identify ourselves with the housewives as a way to break an enslavement system as:

(…) until we recognise our slavery we cannot recognise our struggle against it, because as long as we think we are something better, something different than a housewife, we accept the logic of the master, which is a logic of division, and for us the logic of slavery.241

This struggle for visualization was widely addressed by the works of the mother artists in Chapter I. As well as on the other hand, the connection between motherhood and precariousness —also within the art world in its contemporary shapes of unwaged and precarious work— can be understood from the perspective of the early feminist Marxist struggle of the 1960’s and 1970’s that consisted in recognizing the hidden social labor of care and domestic work.

Furthermore, the history of feminism has counted more with belittlement rather than with recognition as the hidden social labor of care and domestic work. In this respect Louise Bourgeois contrasted the usual differentiation in the levels of seriousness from the master, which is a logic of division, and for us the logic of slavery.241

In this respect Louise Bourgeois contrasted the usual differentiation in the levels of seriousness interpreted from the gender attitudes, as Bourgeois stated that when a man speaks, “of course, when he speaks the world stops in its tracks. Whereas she, she just chitchats. And when it’s time for dinner, he’s the chef. He prepares this wonderful meal! Whereas she, she just cooks. Just cooks.”243

At the same time that within the dynamics of the art world, the exhibition at the ICA of the British group "Towards a Sociology of the Home" or the re-opening "of the kitchen pots. Amidst wars, economic crises, devaluations, as the world around them was falling apart, they have planted corn on abandoned town plots, cooked food to sell on the side of the streets, created communal kitchens -ola communes- as in the case of Chile and Peru, thus standing in the way of a total commodification of life.241

The above referred case of the Common Cooking Pots in Chile and Peru in the 1980s is a movement to which, due to stifflnflation, women joined, as they could no longer afford to shop alone.247

In this scenario it is thanks to women’s struggles that they continue to provide for their families’ consumption, often farming on unused public or private land, and this way millions of people have been able to survive in the face of economic liberalization.244

Another examples are found in Africa, where women produce 80% of the food people consume, despite the attempts by the World Bank and other agencies to convince them to divert their activities to cash-cropping.249 In the 1990s, in many African towns, in the face of rising food prices, women appropriated plots in public lands and planted corn, beans, cassava. As in India, the Philippines, and across Latin America, women have replanted trees in degraded forests, joined hands to chase away loggers, made blockades against mining operations and the construction of dams, and led the rebellion against the privatization of water.250

As well as the formation of credit associations based on the concept of money as a common from Cambodia to Senegal.251 Differently named, the "tontines" in Africa are “autonomous, self-managed, womenmaking banking systems that provide cash to individuals or groups that have no access to banks, working purely on a basis of trust,”252 and contrary to the World Bank’s microcredit systems which have driven women to suicide;253 to mention just some examples.

The social movements above referred have this way struggled to keep strong and with dignity in the time of imposed scarcity that is lived at the other side of hyper consume, pointing to the need of re-opening “a collective struggle over reproduction aiming to create new forms of cooperation (…) that are outside of the logic of capital and the market,”254 and that are able to recognize and connect the two sides of hyper production, as well as it is mandatory to rethink “the question of “reproduction” in a planetary perspective,”255 as stated by Silvia Federici.

These social movements also confirm that no matter the different stage of capitalist development around the world, women have been kept in a disadvantaged position.

As we have shown, it is not the same struggle that feminism faced in the first world than the
one of the “low class feminists” from around the world, who have fought since long ago. Such struggle is fairly absent from the works of art produced during the 1960’s and 1970’s, which restricts our global correlations to a silent zone, impeding the necessary sensibilization able to conduct to changes, of which art is responsible.

As described above and because of the different stages of capitalist development throughout the globe, feminism was only possible to take place in the first world, while the low income women’s struggles of the third world faced - and have kept facing - a profoundly different environment that impedes them to identify themselves with feminism and thus be part of it. For these women feminism “connoted women who spurned tradition, bashed men, acted like men, or maybe even wanted to be men, but in any case their demands for equality had to do with upper-class women.”

It is thus necessary to deepen in their perspective to find the terms that better adjust to their needs and concerns in the general demand for better life conditions.

However, the first and third world women - and also men - are ultimately connected by our current state of production that inevitably becomes a production of death for others.

This way, we are sadly connected by what Maria Mies describes like “what appears as development in one part of the capitalist faction is underdevelopment in another part.” Fields like art, where only few cases can be mentioned, have marginally explored this relation.

This is the case of Line Storm’s work in 1975, as part of the “Women’s Exhibition XX in Charlottenburg” (1975) in Copenhagen. Storm’s work consisted in a pyramid made of milk cartons of 5x5 meters. On the walls of the room photographs hung depicting the industrialization of food production, as well as women and children of the so-called third world who did not have real access to the food they were producing.

At the same time, in the present time of globalization and exacerbated migration of the population, the differentiation of peripheral and central countries as an experience of the world dilutes, once millions of women migrate, creating new categories of poverty. This way poverty has, since early capitalism, had a female face, and nowadays women are “the shock absorbers of the economic crisis originally triggered by the globalization process but now destined to become a permanent feature of the world economy.”

And in this process, millions leave their countries because in them they cannot reproduce themselves, constituting half of them women.

In the following chapter we will thus add a final and brief analysis to the contemporary phenomena of migration that appears as a result of women’s precarious life conditions.

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259 Ibid p. 99
Chapter IV. Immigrant Force Represented

In this final Chapter we will give a space to the immigrant women of our current time, whose lives elapse in the first world, whilst facing the ineluctable fact of a disadvantaged position as third world migrants. We will thus address some art pieces that exemplify, in note of motherhood, the complex position these women occupy.

As discussed in the previous chapter, millions leave their countries because in them they cannot reproduce themselves, constituting half of them women, many married and with children whom they must leave behind.\(^{262}\)

It is true that these migrant women entered the waged workplace when arriving to every country of Western Europe and the US, and found jobs as domestic workers, sex workers, eldercarers and nurses, generally losing their social status and facing years of social isolation. This is, fleeing poverty women have found only more of it. Across the planet, these working class life conditions consist on carrying on two jobs, in a strenuous workweek that leaves them no time for anything but work.\(^{263}\)

Whereby much of the metropolitan work-force is now performed by immigrant women, a new international division of labor has been constructed on the pauperization of the populations of the Global South as the women from Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America or Asia leave their land and their absence constitutes a direct impoverishment of their communities’ human capital.\(^{264}\)

Ironically, as these women provide for the care of the first world, the global cutting and privatization of healthcare has reduced the service offered by hospitals,\(^{265}\) leaving their children unattended at home. And also, while governments celebrate the “globalization of care”, this disposition enables them to reduce the investment in reproduction.

In a global perspective, in Silvia Federici’s words:

Neither the reorganization of reproductive work on a market basis, nor the “globalization of care,” much less the technologization of reproductive work have in any way “liberated women” and eliminated the exploitation inherent to reproductive work in its present form. If we take a global perspective we see that not only do women still do most of the housework in every country, but due to the state’s cut of investment in social services and the decentralization of industrial production the amount of domestic work paid and unpaid they perform may have actually increased, even when they have had a extradomestic job.\(^{266}\)

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As well as a general approach to migration should not forget that, again, in Federici’s words:

When hundreds of thousands leave, to face years of humiliation and alienation, and live with the anguish of not being able to give to the people they love the care they give to others across the world, we know that something quite dramatic is happening in the organization of world reproduction.267

In this respect the image of the immigrant mother has been a recurring figure type in nineteenth-century North American pictures of immigrants.268 Most precisely breastfeeding immigrants, like the case of the 1884 painting of Charles Ulrich “In the Land of Promise, Castle Garden” in which converge motherhood, breastfeeding and the politics of race, class and heredity.

This painting reflects on a historical moment where at the same time that immigrant offsprings were thought to strengthen the nations by becoming citizens, whilst the underlying xenophobia made them threats as they were not believed to be able to escape their heritage, as well as their cultural and moral roots, come from the old country.269

Contemporary migration presents a new social figure. This is the one of the woman who, lacking the documents that allow her to stay legally, gives birth to a child in the foreign country. This process is described by South Carolina Senator Lindsey Graham as immigrants that

Come here to drop a child. It’s called “drop and leave”. To have a child in America, they cross the border, they go to the emergency room, have a child, and that child’s automatically and American citizen. That shouldn’t be the case. That attracts people for all the wrong reasons.270

Inside the global mobilization new familiar structures emerge, where the mother is deported and the children face no other option but staying in their new countries of origin.

This is the case of Elvira Arellano whose images constitute a representation of a modern “Madonna and Child” –Image 1 below-. As well as Sayda Umanzor, who during her deportation was separated from her American born, 9 months old, breastfed son, for 11 days –Image 2 below-.271

267 Ibid.
269 Ibid p. 33-36
270 Ibid p. 38
271 Ibid p. 38-40
In this respect reflects the work “America’s Family Prison” (2008) – image above – of Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo, in which she spends two and a half days with her husband and 8 months daughter. In a private interview with Galindo she explains that the work was produced in Texas in a moment where there were 52 private prisons in Texas. In the work a prefabricated prison of 1.50 x 1.50m was brought inside the gallery Artpace in Texas, whose interior was “decorated in the way of the double moral, typical from North America, works.” Galindo’s prison was just the way real prisons are: full with products from Walmart. In a hypocritical way of saying that they respect human rights, North America imprisons all the family to keep them together. This is the reason why the presence of objects for babies in the prison like cradles is perverse and per se violates all human rights.272

Or in Michel Foucault’s words: “this is the fascinating thing about prisons. The power neither conceals itself nor is masked, it shows as ferocious tyranny in the most minimal details.”273 As the artist explains, also the public’s reaction needs further analysis as in her words:

There are 52 private prisons crowded with children that spend three years there in a shitty life because they can’t study and neither do much, but the public was instead worried that my daughter spent 48 hours with me in the prison.

That means that they criticize the representation in a gallery of a situation that is already happening around them, but they don’t find the tools to fight the reality of how prisons work.

It is as if they don’t want to see and they don’t want to accept this situation that already happens in a huge scale, and an artwork confronts their feelings on the subject.274

“America’s Family Prison” (2008) is the third work in which Galindo discusses motherhood. The previous two works were produced during her pregnancy, “Mirror for the little death” (2006) when she was 6 months pregnant and “While they are still free” (2007)275 with 8 months pregnant.

“America’s Family Prison” (2008) points to the fact that private prisons in the United States is an industry that has experienced exponential growth since 1980 and today flourishes due to antiterrorism measures and the hardening of immigration laws.276

As a model for her work, Galindo takes T. Don Hutto “Family Detention Center,” located in Taylor, Texas, and operated by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA).

CCA is the largest private jail company in the world with one of the highest stock market values on Wall Street. And T. Don Hutto is one of the many facilities that make up this booming industry. The private prison business has its own commercial exhibitions, conventions, websites, and mail-order catalogues, and works with hundreds of partner companies—from architecture and construction firms to plumbers and vendors of food, security equipment and uniforms, to name only a few—that provide each prison with a range of services.277

In the case of Galindo, given that she is a well known internationally artist, winner of the Golden Lion award at the Venice Biennale in 2005 in the category of “artists under 35”, the first and third worlds collide:

I am Guatemalan and I live in two worlds. The majority of the time I am in Guatemala where the reality is that I am a weird case because of having only one child. In Guatemala women normally have many children. My mother had five children. But I belong to this context in the first place than the one of the art world where women does not have children.

That is the reason why I travel five days and come back to my nest. I am not interested in staying longer outside.278

272 Interview with the artist
273 Apud http://www.artpace.org/works/iar_iar_spring_2008/americas-family-prison
274 Interview with the artist
275 Ibid.
276 Ibid.
277 Ibid.
278 Interview with the artist
Regarding feminism in her life as a Latin American, Galindo thinks that

to be a feminist does not go against your maternal instinct. On the contrary, to have a daughter is to have more strength to show her the way. There is plenty to do with a daughter or a son because you are educating them with a new life standard.279

But Galindo recalls being screamed by an artist friend: "You stupid! Feminist artists do not get pregnant! Abort that child!" Galindo believes that there are many artist friends who could not negotiate the two paths of motherhood and career and many women artist left the time passed by in the rush of their career, and when they decided to have a child it was too late for them.

For Galindo it was not easy to get pregnant and face her gallery as they answered that she had not even worked with them for three months. But her fear lasted a couple of months and then the hormonal changes of pregnancy took over.

The main concern of people around her was that motherhood would modify the sharpness and anger of her work, "expressing the fear that I was going to lose my capacity of being critical, or that I was going to dedicate myself to the domestic affairs." But on the contrary she "began to feel much more compromised as there was one more reason to keep producing (her) work and to keep pushing to change the order of things."

Another examples of artistic work done on the subject of maternity and migration are the works of Patricia Cué "Bundle of Joy"(2004) in which the Mexican mother artist faces the strong differences of being an immigrant mother in the U.S.

As well as Youngbook Hong's work "What She Carries"(2002), an online work in which, among other subjects, Hong deals with her disappearance in her daughter's name as her mother disappeared in hers.

Moreover, Gail Rebhan "Mother-Son Talk"(1996), "Diversity"(2000) and "Family Shield"(2003) describe the cultural shocks of a Jewish family in the U.S.

As well as Myrel Chernick's "On the Table"(1996) and Camile Bilops and James Hatch's "Finding Christa"(1991) bring to discussion the connection between race, class and the violence that mothers enforce to children.280

These works represent the contemporary scenario in which women's life conditions have not changed in relation with the works produced by mother artist during the 1960s and 1970s, discussed in Chapter I. On the contrary, the works representing motherhood from the experience of migration constitute a natural projection in time of the problematics that the mothers fought during the 1960s and 1970s. These problems have been exacerbated by the phenomenon of migration and thus have been both cause and consequence of the pauperization of women.

At the same time that the works previously presented insist on the fact that women have been called to play a role at the lowest grade in the scale of the opportunities that would allow them to live a good and independent life.

279 Interview with the artist
This text deals with the danger that implies to speak about the difficulties of being a woman inside our current patriarchal and economic system, and this way, by addressing the subject, it can be simplistically understood as a call to repeat the traditional roles that women have been forced to occupy. Our goal could not be more opposed to that, as we aim to have revisited the notion of “mother” and “motherhood” needs yet to be defined and it is still necessary to revisit even the language from which these terms emerge, as we are still limited by language, being this one more tool used to reinforce patriarchy.

It is clear that in this intricate trap, to deal with the subject of motherhood, as the mere fact of having children has demonstrated, carries all possible difficulties, and this situation impedes a bigger discussion on our life conditions. We believe that we still need to insist not only in increasing the debate on precariousness, as it is also necessary to create new terms to define our position as women outside the standards normalized for us by men, and this way undermine the repetition of the traditional destiny for women; and with it, to undercut the work done against women, including in this work our dangerous self-imposed misogyny.

In a context where care has been relegated to a non-profitable position and has thus been left silent, it is important to insist in continuing with the discussion on the topic of motherhood and capitalism. It is from this silence that I want to thank my supervisors of the Master in Critical Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, from where this research emerges, Univ.-Prof. Mag. Constanze Ruhm and Univ.-Prof. Diedrich Diederichsen, as well as my family, for their encouragement during this research and the production of the video that accompanies it, as a discussion on the topic of motherhood still finds it hard to be supported.

Together with this written research a video was produced as a complement and a continuation in time of the struggles rose by artists in the 60’s and 70’s that, sadly, are still present nowadays. This video can be seen in the link vimeo.com/claudiasandovalromero/motherhoodintheartworld -Image below- and consists of interviews to the artists Renate Bertlmann, Regina José Galindo, Christine Hohenbüchler, Stephanie Misa, Tanja Ostojic and Signe Rose, as well as to the curator and art historian Vanessa Joan-Müller.

The video discusses precarious life conditions of women in the art world, as well as the complexity in the search of balance between private life, money making and career within the art field. This research deals with some art practices and is an invitation to further reflect about motherhood in other areas, even the ones alien to the art world.

Finally, we would like to conclude that what strikes the deepest about the art works related in the extension of this article, is that spirit of the 1960’s and 1970’s that defended life as a result of freedom and ultimate believe in life. This premise is what perhaps has remained until our current time of economic and social pessimism, as well as future pessimistic prognosis, and it has the shape of a tiny light of hope that continues leading us to the inexplicable will of existence, believing that despite hard conditions and as far as there is a struggle for all to live a good life, life is still worth to be reproduced.
Fig.1. Chana Orloff “Reclining Maternity” (1923)

Fig.2. Käthe Kollwitz “Tower of Mothers” (1938)
Fig. 3. Claudia Sandoval Romero, Video "Motherhood in the Art World" (2015)
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