

Margaret Morgan

Artist's Statement

1972. A new mother lives in a communal household. The group thinks that the state will wither away, capitalism too. When the group asks the mother to wean her baby, the better to share equally the responsibility of childrearing, the mother cries. The mother does not want to wean her child. The mother wants to be the primary caregiver. For the mother, this is the moment when the psychoanalytic enters the discourse, no Marx without Freud, no Lacan without Kristeva: in the new world, universal childcare will be necessary but not sufficient. The mother is Mary Kelly, the artist whose early career would cohere around soiled diapers, and whose practice has always been profoundly on the side of the maternal.

2002. Three decades later, capitalism is still with us, albeit altered and writ large, ascendant and neo-liberal, an image on an electronic billboard. A new mother lives with her husband and baby daughter. The new mother is as old as a grandmother. Coming to parenthood late, she has inherited her mother's law. She has also inherited the lore of her pedagogical mothers: Mary Kelly has taught her well. This mama wants nothing to do with sharing the feeding of her baby. She doesn't know it but she practices attachment parenting: sleeping with, feeding and caring for her baby daughter until the child chooses to move on, her daughter taught from infancy that she has the right to choose. The mother is fortunate to have a partner who supports her in this, and in the parenting: the partner/husband/father swinging the infant long into the night to get her to sleep, changing the diapers, sharing both the bed and the attentions of the mother. This mother is an artist and she is me.

Mothering is my practicum and as such it reaffirms the value of the philosophy and critical thought I learn as an artist. This is not the simple delight in observing my infant's entering the mirror stage or abjecting bodily waste or her mildly phobic reaction to the plug hole of the bathtub but, more deeply, the way avant garde practice informs who I am as a mother. If art of the past one hundred and fifty years has yearned to be 'life', if the practice of artists has approached the *dasein* of daily life, then artists who are mothers have *arrived*. Thus mothering becomes durational performance, situationist

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dérive, post-studio conceptual art. The mothering artist performs ritualistic activities with bodily fluids and substances that look and feel like bodily fluids. The mothering artist builds the archive, documents and repeats process on a scale beyond the most arduous of performances. The mothering artist loses the object better than her conceptual forebears and then finds the object like the best of Dadaists. In the course of her work, her practice is improvisational, spontaneous, methodical, process-based, surreal. It is a throw piece extraordinaire. It is made up of junk. It is quotational, post-modern, hybridized: mothering artists take what they need wherever they find it. Of course no child is a ready-made, but when artists mother they bring to that practice an entire history of radical methodologies.

Conversely, mothering informs my identity as an artist and as a human being. I am physiologically and psychologically changed. Mothering has altered my sense of time. I am almost always punctual now. My child will never be left standing, the last one to be picked up against a darkening evening sky. It has altered my sense of personal history. I don't care about art the way I once did – desperately, completely – but I care about it better, more as an equal to it: In the first half of my life I made the choice to avoid mothering and thereby avoid the pitfalls of my own upbringing in poverty and a good dose of misery. In the second half of my life, I have been fortunate enough no longer to be poor and to have been able to choose mothering – to just one child, with a loving spouse: Mary Kelly is a great role model here. Yet with each phase of my daughter's growth I recall my own long forgotten, repressed, inaccessible childhood, its pleasures and privations, its absences and abuses and the good fortune that it was not worse. Parenting means having the choice to repeat 'the sins of the father' or to give your child the gift of feminism, art, politics, love, pleasure, desire, order, strength – and to let her choose what she will do with it all.

When my daughter was a toddler she once peered into my eyes with a curious intensity. When I asked what she was looking at she said:

“I can see me in your eyes.”