

On Interregnum: Being Childfree, Maternity Leave and Maintenance Art

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It is Sunday, 24 August. I am writing this in Copenhagen at the fourteenth annual international conference for the field of Performance Studies. The conference is entitled *Interregnum*. According to my laptop dictionary¹ interregnum stands for:

1. the period of time between the end of one reign or regime and the beginning of the next.
2. a period of time during which there is no government, control, or authority.
3. a pause or gap in any continuous activity or series.

This contribution will consider three different interregnums of my own; being childfree for a week whilst my parents look after my three children; my maternity leave that took place from July 2007 to April 2008; and maintenance art which has lately preoccupied my own arts practice. My aim here is to pull these three different interregnums together in order to think through the notion of maternal studies.

Here I am in Copenhagen childfree, alone with my partner. We are presenting The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, our arts activist initiative set up in the third bedroom of our council house.² We are talking about the possibility of a productive space whilst being 'in-between' the private and public. Our three children Neal, Gabriel and Sid are with my parents in Dubrovnik, Croatia. They are seven, five and one. This is the first time we have been away from them together for such a long time. Seven days. It feels odd and liberating. I feel guilty. I am projected back to the time when it was possible to have a sneaky sleep in the afternoon. There is no one pulling at my sleeve; no one is asking for my constant attention. There is something called silence; there is the reading of books on airplanes. It feels as if I have managed to read as much in these seven days as in the last seven years.

Last night, in a bar, after the day full of panels, presentations and performances, a Danish woman performance artist came over to me to say goodbye. She had to leave early because it was her daughter's birthday the next day. She said she couldn't be too tired for the

occasion. I was shocked that she had children, two children, a boy and a girl, aged nine and eleven. How was this possible, I wondered? This was the first time I heard the mention of children in the space of six days at the conference by any one of the delegates, in papers or in person. Except for an occasional pram being pushed round the campus, this is a childless environment. The Performance Studies international conference is just about childfree.

This is the right time and space to get on with this contribution. Being childfree affords me an opportunity to get on with my work on the maternal. Soon time will no longer be my own. Soon, a new regime will follow. I will be back in the world of parents in no time, *with* no time. Soon my children, still on their summer holiday, will colonize all of my time. This is it, me writing my contribution for the inaugural first edition of e-journal 'Studies in the Maternal' whilst pretending to be childless at an academic conference. This seems the only possible time to do it, here whilst at interregnum, in-between regimes.

During the last year I have worked on a multidisciplinary arts project called *Contemplation Time* (2007-08), closely linked with my maternity leave for my third baby, Sid. July 2007 to April 2008 was my time 'off' work, my maternity leave. Within that interregnum, the time around birth, so disruptive and difficult, I have attempted to defy the Mother norm, creatively refiguring motherhood through an arts practice. *Contemplation Time* entailed the keeping of a diary, repeated walks to a particular park bench, taking photographs and a public performance with the baby Sid. These were all my attempts to chart, mark and document this fragile time.³ It was through formalizing and charting my and Sid's existence together during these few months of maternity leave that I managed to get on with my life as a mother and as an artist. *Contemplation Time* provided me with a different kind of time with Sid, time without explicit mothering.

Through an arts practice, my life during maternity leave, life in the state of interregnum, became yet again organized, sorted-out, neat and manageable. The everyday, which was ruled by the newborn revolutionary, with no concept of government, control or authority, got to be ordered and transformed, first into something repetitive (diary writing, walks in the park, taking of photographs) and then into something reflexive and performative (public performance). The artistic processes of writing my diary, walking in the park, taking photographs, making video films and compiling of that material into a performance are all in juxtaposition with the daily messiness of mothering labour. My performance *Sid Jonah*

Anderson by Lena Simic (MAP Live, Carlisle 2008) staged that daily labour of mothering, in particular Sid's bedtime routine. The live action on stage consisted of performing the daily routine with Sid: bathing, dressing, feeding, laying down to sleep. This very banal everyday action was heightened through its staging. My movements on stage were quite sharp, neat and timed. Props were arranged and the performance space was highly organized. Additionally, the action was complemented by audio-visual footage: extracts from my diary and photographs from my walks in the park.

Contemplation Time stands as an attempt to translate the daily maternal labour during my maternity leave into a feminist critical performance practice of everyday life. My aim is to de-authorise a private/public binary as well as acknowledge the importance of the lived experience and the everyday labour of mothering within an art context. This project follows in the tradition of a critical feminist arts practice, particularly the work from the 1960s and 1970s artists like Mary Kelly, Léa Lublin and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Women artists have often used their lived experience in order to produce their art. They have performed on both sides, in life and in art, making the invisible and undervalued women's labour visible. Ukeles's *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* (1969) grew out of her experience of becoming 'the mother/maintenance worker'. Whilst realizing that she had never worked so hard in her whole life, people still asked her: 'Do you do anything?'"⁴ *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* proclaims maintenance as art and thus argues for a different kind of value system within an art context. Contrasting the art of maintenance to the avant-garde art, which is based on individuality, originality and development/progress, Ukeles exposes and validates the repetitive, ungrateful, endless, undervalued - and yet essential - labour. In *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* she asks: 'After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?'

Maternal labour is a maintenance art, the constant work happening underneath, at the base of society. Yet, maintenance art is also an interregnum, a pause or a gap in any continuous activity or series. Both, in the context of the art world and academia, in the production of affect and knowledge, maternal studies equals maintenance art – a reflexive pause, which not only helps combat the prescribed and ideal motherhood, but also negotiate one's own mothering praxis.

References

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¹ Encarta World English Dictionary, developed for Microsoft Corporation (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 1999).

² For more information on The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home see <<http://www.twoaddthree.org>> [accessed 30 August 2008].

³ For more information on *Contemplation Time* project see Lena Simic, 'Impossible Expectations and Everyday Interventions: A Document of Maternity Leave', *n.paradoxa: International Feminist Art Journal*, 22 (2008), 79-83.

⁴ *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. by Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, 2007, p.311.