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BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW

Review of *New Maternalisms: Redux*

New Maternalisms: Redux Curated by Natalie S. Loveless,
FAB Gallery 1-1 Fine Arts Building, University of Alberta,
Edmonton, May 12–June 4, 2016

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New Maternalisms: Redux is the third iteration of an exhibition of work that engages with what it means to be a mother and to perform/act maternity. Curated by Natalie Loveless, *New Maternalisms: Redux* was accompanied the colloquium *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene*. Organized with Sheena Wilson, *Mapping the Maternal* grappled with how a maternal ethics might offer new ways of thinking about the Anthropocene, a term coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2010 to indicate the geological impact of humans on the planet. *Mapping the Maternal* was an attempt to use maternal ethics—defined by philosopher Sara Ruddick as a non-violent, anti-militaristic approach based on the daily job of nurturing children and by psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger as an early language based on the threads of connection and co-extensiveness between mother and child—to grapple with the present societal and ecological imbalance of the world today, an imbalance caused by greed, global capitalism, the exploitation of natural resources, and an ever increasing divide between the haves and the have nots, developed and undeveloped countries, the technologically literate and the technology deprived, and those with access to potable water as opposed to those without.

The previous iterations of *New Maternalisms* in Toronto (2012, Sponsored by FADO at Mercer Union) and Chile (2014, co-curated with Soledad Novoa Donoso at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo MAC and Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes MNBA) had included the work of over twenty artists, working in a variety of media from painting and photography to installation, sculpture, and video. *New Maternalisms: Redux*,

on the other hand, showcased the work of only five artists, all of whom had been included in the earlier exhibitions as well: Lenka Clayton, Jess Dobkin, Alejandra Herrera Silva, Courtney Kessel, and Jill Miller. All five artists have been concerned with addressing the maternal ethics of caring and connection in their work that was articulated by the presenters and interlocutors in the Colloquium. And, significantly, these artists have focused on the materiality of childcare, of the “stuff” that accompanies this maternal labor and makes it possible. The title “New Maternalisms” is a riff on new materialism, a label given to a series of recent, multidisciplinary inquiries in the sciences and humanities that criticize anthropocentrism by giving emphasis to the role of in or non-human forces on the formation of subjectivity in relationship to the ecosystem of the planet. New materialist theorists call for a truly global approach, one that takes into account the force that so-called inanimate objects can exert on the animate world in which they exist. New materialism has been posited as an alternative to the cultural or linguistic turn, which has dominated academic and intellectual discourse for approximately the past thirty years. In a world where a civil war in Syria has reached countries on the other side of the globe, cultural/linguistic analysis that is both disembodied and disconnected from non-human animals and inanimate materials in which *all* animals are physically and psychically enmeshed can no longer suffice. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, in their introductory text to new materialisms, have written the following;

We share the feeling current among many researchers that the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy. While we recognize that radical constructivism has contributed considerable insight into the workings of power over recent years, we are also aware that an allergy to “the real” that is characteristic of its more linguistic or discursive forms—whereby overtures to material reality are dismissed as an insidious foundationalism—has had the consequence of dissuading critical inquirers

from the more empirical kinds of investigation that material processes and structures require (2010, p. 6).

The three iterations of *New Maternalisms* have investigated and explored the material and affective processes of maternity. For *Loveless*, it was important to select artists who are taking up the issue of maternity in their work. Many of these artists are approximately the same age as Kelly Barrie, the son of Mary Kelly and the subject of her opus *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1979), a multi-year exploration of maternal subjectivity that used Lacanian theory as lens through which to understand the Kelly Barrie's psychosocial development from birth until the time that he entered the symbolic order and was able to write his own name. Kelly was living in the UK at the time that she made *Post-Partum Document*, which was about the language and representation of maternal desire and psychosocial development. Influenced by the new field of British feminist Marxist and poststructuralist theory, Kelly deliberately avoided sentimentality and aesthetic pleasure in order to thwart the ideological fetishization and romanticization of the maternal. The artists included in the three *New Maternalisms* exhibitions, while profoundly influenced by Kelly's important and pioneering work, are less willing to deny the materiality and affects of motherhood, finding that these qualities have implications for an ethical global politics that finds less distinction between the animate and inanimate than had been posited earlier. The artists included in *New Maternalisms* have eschewed the linguistic turn in favor of an art practice that takes an unabashed pleasure in the materials and affective/caring relationships that has been labeled maternal. *Loveless* noted this in the catalogue essay for the Toronto exhibition, writing that:

For those of us formed by the poststructuralist tradition, any return to the materiality of motherhood is fraught territory. . . . In contrast to the racial disjuncture between language and bodies posited by poststructuralism, the new materialism proposes that the relation between bodies, spaces, psyches, and meanings are never *a priori* determinable (2012, p. 7).

On the one hand, the new maternalism movement, with its unabashed embrace of maternal caregiving, ethical attachment, maternal language, ecologies of care, and the materiality of the animate and inanimate seems to be pointing back to feminist art in the seventies, which was often labeled essentialist due to its conflation of women and their bodies with patriarchy's binary opposites—nature, nurture, and egalitarianism. On the other hand, new maternalisms, as articulated by Roksana Badruddoja, is much more concerned with understanding the politics of maternal caregiving and labor as a global phenomenon and in examining the role of “motherwork” from the place of otherness. Badruddoja asks “how do global discourses shape local motherwork, and, how, in turn, do local issues and frames shape global discourses around motherwork?” (2016, p. 3). Significantly, the work included in *New Maternalisms: Redux* did not deal directly with the amelioration of the environment, even though the colloquium that it accompanied was premised in part around the Anthropocene. Instead, the work engaged with the materials, temporality and geographies of maternal care. In so doing, it demonstrated how male centered environmental activism continues to be. As Loveless pointed out, art, the Anthropocene and environmental activism are hot topics these days, but primarily amongst male theorists and artists (Sandals, 2016). The opening night of the exhibition began with a speech by the honourable Stephanie Mclean, elected member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta for Calgary-Varsity and the Minister of the Status of Women. Minister Mclean brought her partner and her infant son to the opening and stayed around after the speech viewing the artwork, watching or participating in the performances, and chatting with the people attending the event. Minister Mclean's speech was followed (or in the case of Miller and Dobkin preceded and followed) with performances by Jess Dobkin, Jill Miller, Courtney Kessel, and Alejandra Herrera Silva. The fifth artist, Lenka Clayton, was not present, but represented by the relics of her ongoing performance *Residency in Motherhood*. The four opening night performances resulted in installations that remained on view for the remainder of the exhibition.

At 6 p.m. sharp, Jill Miller began making her *24 Hour Family Portraits* in the upper level of the gallery (**Figure 1**). Simultaneously Jess Dobkin set up her *Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* on the lower level. *24 Hour Family Portraits* were based on a



Figure 1: Jill Miller. *Family Portraits*. 2016 ongoing. Photo courtesy of Michael Wooley.

soundscape provided to Miller by the mother figure in the house. Miller had made available in advance a log that people could use to write down the sound events in their home, with the result that a number of people immediately approached Miller for their “family portrait”—assembled by Miller and her assistants with brightly colored spheres of varying size arranged sculpturally against a generic, family portrait style “nature” backdrop. Using a playdough-like material, Miller assigned each family member a color, and then sculpted a ball for each sound event associated with that person. The louder the sound event the larger the ball. The resulting portraits were photographed, printed, and mounted on the wall in colorful tape frames. The *24 Hour Family Portraits* suggested a different economy based on tactility rather than the visual. It was almost as though Miller had helpfully translated the material, sonic portrait of the family into representation, so that the non-family members could understand the soundscape of the family. In addition to her *24 Hour Family Portraits*, Miller exhibited archival material from *The Milk Truck*, a project where she deployed a food truck that could be used for women to breastfeed when they were harassed

for doing so in public, and *Homeschooled*, a series of works made in conjunction with her autistic son that included *Xtreme Mothering*, video footage from a GoPro HD camera strapped to Miller's head while she performed mothering duties such as toilet training and cooking. The soundtrack to these videos was appropriated from the GoPro website.

For *Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* (**Figure 2**) Dobkin recruited a number of local women who were lactating and asked them to donate their milk for this project. On the opening night, Dobkin acted as sommelier, offering patrons samples of breast milk from different sources. Much like a wine tasting event, different samples of breast milk were offered to the customers, who were able to choose which samples they preferred from the helpful tasting menu, which included samples such as Superpower Substance, The Very First Treaty, Jus de Vivre, Finest Fast Food, and Nature n' Nurture. A video display near *Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* played interviews with the various donors of these gourmet offerings, who discussed their background, philosophy on breast feeding, and, most importantly, their diet and



Figure 2: Jess Dobkin. *Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* 2016 ongoing. Photo courtesy of Michael Wooley.

exercise regime. Patrons were invited to cleanse their palettes in between samples with bowls of dry cheerios. *Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar*, which Dobkin has performed in the past, brought the audience directly into contact with material—breast milk—that is and is not “alive.” For adults—and the adults that night included Minister McLean’s partner who held his own baby while sampling other women’s breast milk—drinking breast milk feels cannibalistic, and thus taboo and unclean. While it is not on the level of the cannibalism that was implied by Zhu Yu’s *Eating Babies* (2000), a performance for which most of the world has only photo documentation, *Lactation Station Breast Milk Bar* actually provided *real* breast milk. There was no question of whether or not it was consumed. What is more, the breast milk, which tasted so different, made the audience acutely aware of the degree to which the material world—food, diet, environment—could impact caregiving and nurturance.

Courtney Kessel’s *In Balance With* (2011–) (**Figure 3**) dealt with the material of her daily life with her daughter Chloé Cash Clevenger. For the performance, Kessel constructed a very long teeter totter, with a seat at one end. The performance



Figure 3: Courtney Kessel. *In Balance With*. . . 2011 ongoing. Photo courtesy of Michael Wooley.

consists of Chloé settling into the seat with something to do (initially Kessel gave Chloé things to do when she was younger). Chloé does her work (journal writing, instrument playing, drawing, or explaining to other children what is going on) while Kessel piles on all of the objects that she and Chloé use on a daily basis. During the performance, Kessel might offer Chloé something to eat, or Chloé sometimes requests something from an audience member, such as a pen to write in her journal. Each time an object is added, Kessel sits on the other side of the teeter totter until her weight is in balance with Chloé. The performance ends not when Kessel has achieved balance (although in every version I have seen she is always successful in climbing onto the side opposite Chloé), but when Chloé decides that the performance is finished. Kessel has been performing this piece with Chloé for over 5 years. In that time, the performance has shifted. Initially Kessel used the performance as a way to engage with her young daughter while continuing to make art and maintain her identity as an artist. For *New Maternalisms: Redux* Chloé was almost a teenager. The “stuff” which Kessel painstakingly lugs and ships to each new performance venue – has changed as has Chloé. The material bonds of the mother/daughter relationship are made tangible with all the “stuff” piled atop the teeter totter and left as an installation at the conclusion of the piece.

Kessel’s performance took place in the gallery adjacent to Lenka Clayton’s installation of work made during her Artist-in-Residence-in-Motherhood 2012–2015 (**Figure 4**). Noting that artists’s residencies were usually designed to be peaceful and free of distractions, Clayton became the first artist to choose a residency in motherhood, embracing the chaos, disorder, distraction, and a nap-time block of time to come up with something brilliant and thoughtful. Selections from this “residency” included the installation *Mother’s Days* (2012–2014), a collection of one hundred written accounts by 100 mothers around the world, typed with a manual typewriter on construction paper. The sheer volume of these letters, pages and pages of meticulous accounts of a day with small children manages to be quite humorous (many of the incidents recounted are relatable) and suggest the the heroic amount of maternal labor and energy that goes into producing socialized humans. Also included



Figure 4: Lenka Clayton. *Artist-in-Residence-in-Motherhood* 2012–2015. Photo courtesy of Michael Wooley.

was the video series *The Distance I Can Be Away from My Son* a series of videotaped performances in which Clayton tried to allow her then toddler son Otto to wander as far away as he could before she ran after him. Application forms for the continuing Artist-Residency-in-Motherhood, now made available to interested applicants, who, if they were awarded the residency with its monetary award of \$999, had to agree to contribute that much money to a future resident in motherhood once they were able to do so (Clayton, 2016).

For *New Maternalisms: Redux* Alejandra Herrera Silva devised a new performance titled *Testing the Waters* (**Figure 5**). The piece, according to Herrera Silva, was partially inspired by the relocation of her family including partner/artist Jamie McMurray and her three daughters: twins Trinidad and Evelyn and youngest Diamanda from Los Angeles to Santiago, Chile. Herrera Silva grew up in Santiago, the daughter of a physician and a communist organizer who put her activism on hold in order to raise her children. Born after Augusto Pinochet had come to power, Herrera never knew a time when dissenters such as her mother disappeared—many being



Figure 5: Alejandra Herrera Silva. *Testing the Waters* 2016. Photo courtesy of Michael Wooley.

taken to the local football stadium not far from her childhood home—and never returned. Almost all of Herrera Silva's work engages with the trauma of the Pinochet regime in which many people were taken, tortured, and in some cases put to death. Herrera Silva's performances are structured as a series of images and actions that begin with a pristine space, wine and wine glasses, and unstained, white garments. *Testing the Waters* included a glass pane pressed against the gallery corner that created a container, into which Herrera Silva had piled plates and bowls into this space. Also present was a large glass pane with a poem, in Spanish, to the soldiers/children of Chile, a country that has seen so much sorrow and pain. Over the course of about an hour, Herrera Silva moved around the space, changing into the white garments, pulling wine glasses, tied together by their stems, around the room, and essentially defiling the purity of the space. Herrera Silva repeatedly drank from the glasses, filled with red wine, which she permitted to trickle out of her mouth and stain the red garments. At several points she grasped two handles and hung suspended from the

wall while her dress was stained red. Herrera Silva repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempted to clean up the space, which became littered with objects including shoes and dishes from an earlier era, recalling the manner in which the clothing and household goods of the disappeared remained after their owners were no longer there. The performance ended with Herrera Silva, singing a Chilean song, throwing stones at the glass plane that held the dishes. Eventually the glass broke, causing the dishes and bowls to spill onto the floor. The performance was over (Pountney, 2016).

Herrera Silva's work doesn't directly address motherhood/maternity, politics, ecology, or the manner in which the humans are imbricated within this materialism. Rather, she allows the materials that she uses to speak to a trauma that can only be indirectly represented. The work in this exhibition, and in particular the performance and performance remains of Herrera Silva's *Testing the Waters* speak to a radical ecology of care, the same ecology of care seen in the curatorial room, which included catalogues from the two earlier exhibitions, and the documentation for Loveless's own project *Maternal Ecologies* (2010–2013). For this project, Loveless used the language of performance art to recast the maternal everyday. Influenced by Fluxus, as well as Isabelle Stengers' articulation of an ecology of practices, Loveless invited 5 mothers (Alex Metral, Shannon Coyle, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Krista Lynes, and Dillon Paul) to perform with her every day for 12 weeks (approximately one trimester). For 84 days in a row, Loveless sent a prescription, based on a moment of interaction between herself and her son Orion, to these 5 women, who were invited to witness and perform an action in response. Part 1 was documented in a lovely catalogue *An Action A Day: Maternal Prescriptions* (August 1–October 23, 2010). The close up photographs of Loveless' infant son Orion, as well as the meticulous documentation of her actions, have the same obsessive quality as Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, which, after all, included soiled nappies and a detailed log of what her baby had eaten that day. At the same time, these actions, performed collaboratively through the agency of the internet, speak directly to the affective entanglements of the maternal/material, and to "the complex, multi-valent, and affective textures associated with human infancy" (2014, p. 163).

“With both Edelman and Ettinger in my ears I say: fuck the earth as mother and fuck all that never-ending, giving tree nonsense. . . The maternal, taken seriously as a politics and ethics, is no endless font of plenitude. It is a finite, responsive relation that both gives and needs care, especially care demanding creativity and experiment.” (Sandals, 2016).

Loveless’ position, quoted by Leah Sandals in her write up of the colloquium and exhibition, could very well be a manifesto for a radically feminist art making practice that acknowledges both first and second generation feminist artists without necessarily replicating their earlier work. As Loveless (2012) noted in her catalogue essay for the first *New Materialisms*, the academy as a whole remains very skeptical of children, and of one’s ability to continue as an intellectual once they become a mother. Loveless’ argument that maternity can become a radical position from which to articulate social change and an alternate economy of relations is both courageous and long overdue.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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