

Multiplicities from Motherhood: How the Changing Representation of the Female Body as Mother Widens the Discourse on Issues of Support

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History portrays the female body predominantly in terms of desire and objectification. Feminist works in the more recent past have engaged strategies of shock and of the exposure of interiorized femininity to challenge this paradigm. In these works of art, the female body and its representation have been transformed by using the portrayal of motherhood as a model of female use value, a change that affects how we see the parental role and the role of support in general; and the discourse around these issues continues to broaden the reach of feminism. In this reconsideration of the female body, the expansion of the feminine role by moving women from the decorative realm into a position of ability and by identifying nurturing and support as the essence of mothering changes that role from inactive object to active agent. Caretaking—no longer an identity, but redefined as the thing that is—thus becomes a form of decisive work that should be revalued as a primary role or job, and is further transformed by detaching such work from its traditional gendered categorization.

Woman's bodies in art are represented historically as objects that manifest a divide between public and private, or between interior and exterior. From Renaissance Madonnas to Rubens's nudes, the female body is represented as something to admire. Women were seldom, if ever, portrayed as actors in a scene, but were commonly depicted as receivers of the gaze, quietly posed to be appreciated or acted upon. While a soft and voluptuous body was admired as a sign of fertility and the ability to bear children, the body was otherwise divorced from that function in depictions of women. The idea of the woman as mother was, of course, linked to the depiction of the female body, but in an externalized fashion. We are all familiar with the graceful curves of the pregnant belly, but as one contained body. Similarly, women could be seen peacefully holding an (equally) peaceful infant, after the baby has been born, with its own distinct, separate body. These images do not confront the viewer with the functions that bring a baby from inside to outside the mother's body, nor do they expose the reality of the squirming, sweating, exhausting, active work of nursing an infant.

Mark Cousins, in his series of essays entitled "The Ugly,"¹ defines the ugly as a thing unto itself: the ugly is an excess. He imbues the notion of "ugly" with its own inherent meaning, so that it is no longer defined in relation to beauty or a lack of it. A thing consists of both exterior (its representation) and interior (its existence), and it is precisely when this existence exceeds the representation, or the excess threatens the thing itself, that we react by deeming the thing ugly. Ugliness is not simply the negation of beauty; rather it is experienced as that which is there and also that which should not be there.

In this reading, when the representation still contains the existence, as in the depiction of a Madonna figure holding a baby to her chest, it portrays an expected relationship, still allowing the subject to appreciate the object. However, when actual workings of a woman's body surmount mere image, the viewer is confronted with the unfamiliar and is thus made uncomfortable. Feminist works of the mid-to-late twentieth century that sought to obliterate this divide were not readily accepted by the public, at least in part because of the shock of seeing the representation of women not as a simple object of desire but as a functioning being—that is, by bringing what's inside out. Cousins might say that the act of the interior bursting traumatically through the exterior destroys a subject's fantasy of what is inside. Unlike representations that concentrate their focus on a woman's surface appearance, thus never demanding the viewer to reconcile that image with a woman's inner workings, this interior focus asserted a functioning whole.

Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll*, 1975, a performance work during which she pulls a piece of paper out of her vagina and reads from it, directs the viewer's gaze to those inner workings and relates them to the representation of the body, thus conflating the fantasy distinction of representation and function and repositioning the female body as active. Judy Chicago, too, violates the depiction of a wholly interior whole when she makes the moment between pregnancy and infancy the subject in *The Birth Project*, 1985.

These performance works, among others, called attention to the unreality of viewing a body as a contained and quiet whole, shattering the passive image of a mother holding her child and instead positing (and showing) a woman's body as a functioning and reactive being. In that sense, they are transgressive depictions of women, which subverted the notion of acting upon a woman's body without the attendant experience of the real consequences of that act, which might include anger, frustration, exclamations, feces, blood. This radical switch of focus from exterior to interior upended the dominant order and confronted people with a being that is unfamiliar, causing discomfort to the viewer, and setting a precedent of a woman's body as a functioning whole.

Mary Kelly, in her *Post-Partum Document*, 1973–79, abstracts the bodily image entirely and uses fragments of experience to describe the body of a mother as a tangible archive of those occurrences. She lays bare the research, thought, engagement, energy, repetitiveness, and boredom that goes into taking care of her son, bringing attention to aspects of mothering that are inherent in almost all forms of work. Where motherhood is so often seen as a sentimental connection between mother and child, Kelly exposes it as not only a difficult and complex relationship but as a vital labor, “undermin[ing] the culturally imposed idea of natural mother” and “reconceiv[ing] the construction of the maternal.”ⁱⁱ Mothers are anything but passive, and Kelly makes plain the invisible daily experience of a woman engaged in the work of mothering. Her observations of her infant and very young son's body functions and language development are akin to data sets; when juxtaposed with actual things that he wore or used, they describe the body using unfamiliar constructs, thereby negating direct comparison, and instead creating an entirely other model.

In asserting the validity of making art about life, Kelly also proposes a democratizing attitude toward the possible subjects of works of art, including the personal and quotidian. *Post-Partum Document* is “a vertical class assertion to cross with [a] horizontal capitalist or patriarchal one.”ⁱⁱⁱ Not only is Kelly examining an interiority that is taboo—motherhood and the experience of caring for a child—and asking that the body be reconsidered as operational, but she is also demanding that these operations be considered valid subjects in art.

Catherine Opie, in her photograph of herself nursing her son, 2004, depicts another different-looking mother and, by so doing, further opens motherhood to a greater inclusiveness. She rejects the idealized, and unrealistic, model of a contained woman devoid of her own expressions. Opie presents us with a model outside the dominant one of mother; hers is tattooed, old, fat, gay, marked, and pierced. This excess of Otherness extends the conventional trope of exterior representation into wider realms. A mother is not reducible to the attributes “young,” “slim,” “long-haired,” “quiet.”

Alix Smith extends the notion of what a mother is by requiring us to regard motherhood in terms of the work and role of parenthood. In her series *States of Union*, 2008–14, the mothers she depicts not only do not fit the dominant archetypal heterosexual, married model, but also do not preclude men, thus shifting the term “mother” to a wider one of caregiving. And indeed, parents today are representationally irreducible: men and women, older and younger, straight and gay, single and partnered, and often tattooed, pierced, and jeweled.

I continue to explore in my work, through my own lived experience, how to broaden the discourse around being a mother. In *One Year: Somewhere in Between (a Life in 365 Days)*, 2011–14, I wanted to create a self-portrait of myself as a mother through a compilation of an experience that I cannot reduce to images. When I see a snapshot of myself holding my tiny daughter, it always looks wrong: I don't look like a mother; I just look like the person I always was. The portrait needed to be more encompassing. I combined images of my daughter's daily rest—a symbol of the radical rescheduling of my daily life—with fragments of emails from all aspects of my life to create a quasi-flipbook of what my life felt like: a nonstop slideshow of pieces of things that I could never quite catch up on or control.

My need to continue defining myself grew in part from a disagreement with a colleague a few years ago over how best to update our collective's mission statement (i.e., to use the term “feminist” or “female”), and my own quest to figure out an answer to the question “What does a feminist look like?” Certainly, there are important examples of performative practices and works, some of them discussed above, that have sought (and continue to seek) to break down, exaggerate, violate, and eradicate female norms, but I still had trouble inserting myself into those demonstrated roles. For example: how does a feminist brush her teeth? walk a dog? eat? draw? work? parent?

The birth of my daughter and the subsequent onset of motherhood, on top of years of grappling with my own identity as a girl, woman, wife, mother, and artist, gave me a clearer answer—which is that my own questions, insecurities, worries, thoughts, and experiments comprise one example of the life of a feminist (in all of its seemingly meaningless banalities).

Lucy Lippard reminded me recently, in her AICA-USA Distinguished Critic Lecture at the Vera List Center, of the idea that a feminist supports women, not just herself.^{iv} As in Opie's or Kelly's works, my work too is meant to be expansive, meant to make present the everyday of a particular personal experience—one that tends to disappear in public—as a reminder that it too is part of our collective reality. I see my whole experience as a mother as one that could be experienced, in small parts and large ones, by any person caring for another person, whether a young baby, an adolescent, or an adult.

Gillian Rose acknowledges this need for a critical space that at once occupies the center and the margin, by “going beyond the dominant discourses of identity. . . . a sense that there are other possibilities than the discursive status quo.”^v The increasing number of alternate and specific models that have been proposed subsume, ideally and over time, an irrelevant or outdated model and allow a variety of experiences to be part of the norm. The more of the Other we see, the more of the norm it becomes.

I hope that by drawing attention to the many realities of motherhood, we can identify many models of what a mother is and acknowledge the value of all the work involved in such caretaking. As Liss has observed, “Overlooked [in Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*] was the intensive work involved in maternal acts of care and love.”^{vi} Capitalism's alienation of labor and its focus on the material aspects of success have largely, if not totally, made the vital roles of support and toil invisible. Seeing motherhood as a legitimate, valued form of work changes how we see women and can even change how we see motherhood. If mothering/parenting is regarded not as a single-gendered role behind closed doors but as work that can be done by people other than just the married woman (or even the single woman)—i.e., by single men, LGBTQs, et al.—perhaps it will be reconsidered as important and primary work. We are so often presented with products and services that seem to materialize from nowhere and/or without identifying who produced them that we can ignore the essential, actual work—and who is doing it—that has gone into it. If we can continue to rethink and reframe gender differentiation and labor differentiation, to make visible what is being done and by whom, perhaps we can encourage a rethinking and reevaluation of support roles. These are roles we literally cannot live without. A reexamination of the body itself, in all of its capacities, is a good place to recenter ourselves.

ⁱ Mark Cousins, “The Ugly,” AA Files No. 28 (1994): 61–64.

ⁱⁱ Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lucy Lippard, foreword to *Post-Partum Document*, by Mary Kelly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), vii.

^{iv} This lecture, entitled “Changing: On Not Being an Art ‘Critic,’” was presented by the United States Chapter of the International Association of Art Critics and the Vera List Center for Art and Politics on October 30, 2013 at the New School in New York.

^v Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 172.

^{vi} Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, 28.