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**STRATEGIES:**  
**An Artist Mother's Maintenance Manifesto**

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# ABSTRACT

Becoming a mother is life-changing: it is well documented that it challenges the sense of self and identity. Maintaining an art practice while mothering could be defined as work. There is substantial literature to support the idea that mothering is a discipline just like art is. This involves ‘maternal thinking,’ a multiple-variable thought process used when caring for children. To support this notion, feminist theorists have developed the term matricentric or mother-centered feminism. This positions mothering more as a practice than an identity. This research paper is informed by matricentric feminist ideologies. Given these contributions to the current narrative surrounding motherhood, the idealised image of the ‘good’ mother still prevails in Western society. It appears that to be a ‘good mother’ a woman needs to put her children first. This is at the expense of her desires, passions, and interests. Based on personal first-hand experience as a mother, the widely accepted idea of the ‘good mother’ seems to stem from a patriarchal notion of motherhood that is disempowering and unrealistic. It is perceived that childrearing is gendered: men tend to generally be less involved in it while women are expected to be totally involved.

How does one navigate these prevailing stereotypes and expectations surrounding the idea of the mother who is also an artist? Information on how to manage this conundrum remains an emergent field. Can matricentric feminism be present in an art practice in a seemingly patriarchal society?

With practice-led research, informed by matricentric feminism, *Strategies: An Artist Mother’s Maintenance Manifesto* aims to investigate what kind of processes or strategies emerge from the labour expended when mothering and art making simultaneously. It seeks to validate the seemingly private nature of a mother’s work commonly associated with motherhood by devising four artistic strategies to connect the private to a public exhibition space.

An autoethnographic methodology will be applied for this enquiry. Day-to-day personal experience as a mother and artist will be used as a reference,

vis-à-vis the current discourse surrounding motherhood. This investigation seeks to contribute new narratives on the topic of motherhood and art. This will be achieved in part by applying the concept of trans/performance. The latter consists in connecting the work entailed in everyday mothering with the work involved in making artworks for an exhibition. In other words, trans/performance takes the work of a mother which has been commonly associated with the private and the domestic across into the public sphere where the art exhibition is held. The resulting creative outcomes or “strategies” emulate the works of the American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Her art practice exposed through performance the invisible labour associated with motherhood in conjunction with other tasks associated with the maintenance of a city.

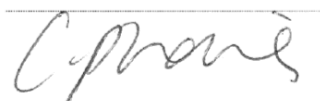
It is suggested that an image of the ideal mother follows gendered conservative values. Framed around a matricentric feminist lens, the research reveals the complexity behind the responsibilities entailed in being both a mother and an artist, beyond societal expectations. An artist mother’s creative process is documented through personal diary entries, through descriptions of the major artworks and creative endeavors conducted for this research. To document this development are four installation works that investigate being a mother and an artist. These works manifest through sculpture, photography, portraiture and video.

The final outcome of this research is an installation in a gallery space. Over 200 sand-filled calico bags, with the word ‘MOTHER’ stenciled on them, are arranged in the space. Also secured on the gallery floor, walls and ceiling are a series of white wax and acrylic sculptures of the artist’s arm. A large, black and white photographic print is mounted on a wall. This work features a portrait of the artist holding both her children in her arms. Another work in the space is a video installation where the artist is seen in a series of clips cleaning sandbags and using sandbags to control water flooding into an outdoor landscape. The audio recording contains a combination of background noise and the artist’s voice in conversation.

# DECLARATION

This is to certify that

- (i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Fine Art degree except where indicated in the Preface\*,
- (ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
- (iii) the thesis is 12,122 words in length as approved by the Research Higher Degree Committee.



Claudia Pharès

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# PROLOGUE

I have been the primary carer of my two children for the past two years or so. This coincides with leaving a relationship where I was experiencing domestic violence. My journey after this breakup has been like an emotional roller coaster. This has been humbling and life-changing, just like becoming a mother.

Becoming a mother came with mixed feelings, self-doubt, pride, joy, loneliness, and frustration. This was made more complex when I felt I was not embodying the idea of a 'good mother' given the social and cultural expectations surrounding me. The context of the marriage I lived in further aggravated my predicament. To integrate and maintain an art practice within this scenario was a challenge. I was faced with a lack of courage to overcome my own high expectation of mothering. Furthermore, the family I was married to, perceived that being an engaged mother and a 'serious' artist were mutually exclusive.

I have chosen to move away from these beliefs in order to pursue a practice that embraces being both an artist and a mother simultaneously. Within this model, one practice informs the other. This research has become my lifeline.

# PREFACE

Autobiographical events have played a major role in my art practice, particularly those that challenged my sense of self and my sense of control. *Strategies: An Artist Mother's Maintenance Manifesto* has investigated how an art practice can be maintained while mothering. Day-to day experience as an artist mother will be used as source material for this ethnographic methodology. The focus of this research will be on motherhood and not on parenting nor on caring concepts. This aims to challenge the perceived socially and historically constructed image of the mother through an interdisciplinary approach.

The structure of this paper is divided into two chapters: the first, '*Good Mother*', explores the concept of mother as a projected ideal and the concept of 'mothering' as a discipline. Mothering activities are the tasks required in caring for children. The concept of trans/performance will be studied as a means to join the private domestic space commonly associated with motherhood to a more public setting such as a gallery space. The second chapter, *Strategies*, addresses how personal experience frames this research through autoethnography. This methodology has been used to reveal how the private associated with the mother can be transgressed. This section will include a description of the processes or strategies used to produce a black-and-white mounted photographic portrait, a sandbag installation, a series of wax and acrylic arm sculptures and a video installation.

## CHAPTER 1: 'GOOD MOTHER'

## ‘GOOD MOTHER’ AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

A prevailing constructed image of motherhood seems to dominate Western society. Ideal motherhood is projected as all-sacrificing, all-loving, and all-forgiving. Andrea O’Reilly, a feminist theorist on motherhood studies, describes how good mothers are defined by the ‘normative’ characteristics of motherhood. They should be altruistic, devoted, cheerful, patient, loving, selfless, and child-centred.<sup>1</sup> The artist mother’s personal experience has demonstrated that the notion of the ‘good mother’ is a patriarchal construct that is disempowering and unrealistic.

It could be argued that to be a ‘good mother’, mothers are denied agency and autonomy according to how they choose to raise their children. In *Of Woman Born*<sup>2</sup>, feminist writer Adrienne Rich has criticised ‘motherhood’ as a patriarchal institution that is male-defined and deeply oppressive to women.<sup>3</sup> She suggests that mothers are faced with a lack of agency in their attempt to perform ‘good’ motherhood. The idealisation of motherhood proposes unrealistic expectations and ignores the real day-to-day labour<sup>4</sup> encountered. Since a great proportion of the work involved in mothering happens out of sight, a mother’s work is often undervalued and undermined. American feminist writer and activist Betty Friedan wrote: “There is a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we are trying to

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice* (Bradford, ON: Demeter Press, 2016), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (Norton, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Andrea O’Reilly, ed. *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> A mother’s day-to-day labour implies the tears, discipline, the tantrums, the routines, the work.

conform”.<sup>5</sup> Mothers seem to be expected to be good housekeepers, presentable, and doing their utmost to prepare healthy meals and care for their children according to the latest popular trends. It is believed that Western normative values relating to women are not only imposed on women about how they should behave, but also about how they should be mothers. Performing the cultural stereotypes of ‘good motherhood’ in Western societies seems to have removed a woman’s maternal personal identity. According to feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick, there is a potential loss of authenticity when women perform motherhood, as they feel policed under the ‘gaze of others’ in the way they perform ‘good motherhood.’<sup>6</sup> As such, if a mother fails to conform to the projected ideal of the mother, a sense of guilt or inadequacy may result. This in turn, may impact on the mother’s well-being and sense of self-worth and consequently affect her ability to raise her children confidently.

Sharing the viewpoint of Adrienne Rich, scholar and philosopher Julia Kristeva also argues that mothers’ loss of subjectivity is due to a form of paternalistic motherhood that prevails in Western societies.<sup>7</sup> Motherhood is seen predominantly as an essentialist experience, and one that defines women as successfully fulfilling their biological role regardless of their needs, passions, interests, and choice.<sup>8</sup> It is thought that a women’s experience of motherhood seems to be ultimately dependant on their ability to have children. In accordance to Kristeva, these beliefs are reductive and are denying women their

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<sup>5</sup> O’Reilly, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Sara Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking,” *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980): 342–67. doi.org/10.2307/3177749.

<sup>7</sup> O’Reilly, 65.

<sup>8</sup> “Julia Kristeva - Motherhood Today.” Accessed August 8, 2018. <http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html>.

right to define themselves as mothers beyond their potential reproductive and biological capabilities.

## MOTHERING AS DISCIPLINE

One strategy to reshape today's discourse on motherhood is to consider motherhood studies as a legitimate and distinctive discipline. As with the discipline of art, motherhood studies could be a discipline that involves a certain branch of knowledge defined as 'maternal thinking'. According to feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick 'maternal thinking' is defined as the thought processes involved in caring for children. Through 'maternal thinking' the mother performs motherwork which is defined as protection of their child's life, nurturance and growth of that life, and training of the child to fit in the socio-cultural context in which they will be a member.<sup>9</sup> The thought processes mothers partake in include making countless timely decisions, planning and prioritizing the various tasks and responsibilities involved in raising children based on the mother's respective values and beliefs. Such tasks involve, menu planning, managing household chores, taking children to school and/or activities, all while tending to the physical and mental needs of her children.<sup>10</sup> As such, motherhood is thought to be a discipline where knowledge is gained on the job and involves the ongoing development of intellectual capacities that can be only acquired through maternal practice.

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<sup>9</sup> Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking." *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980): 342–67.

<sup>10</sup>The following extra list pertains to my (and possibly other mothers) experience of mothering surrounding mental & behavioural care which includes work around discipline, anger-sadness-grief-tantrum management, care post-transitioning from their dad's to mine, management of sleeping issues and anxiety issues, sibling rivalry, management of children in high-conflict divorce, and work around self-care such as counselling and fitness.

In accordance with Ruddick's viewpoint on motherhood as a discipline, maternal studies theorist Andrea O'Reilly devised the concept of 'matricentric feminism'. This is the practice of a mother-centred feminism that relies on an understanding that motherhood is socially and historically constructed. This positions mothering more as a practice than an identity.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, 'matricentric feminism' fosters agency, autonomy, advocacy, activism, authenticity and authority, all of which are denied in patriarchal societies. As Adrienne Rich<sup>12</sup> planted the seed to challenge patriarchal motherhood in the seventies, O'Reilly has encouraged women to reclaim their own agency and identity as women and as mothers. In other words, mothers are encouraged to fight for their motherwork to be recognized and validated on behalf of their children. 'Matricentric feminism' is the framework that this research utilises. It proposes that through the amalgamation of the disciplines of art and mothering, the produced outcome will highlight the labour involved. This will be developed using a non-hierarchical value system where a mother's work is equivalent to an artist's.

Several female artists have explored the concept motherhood in conjunction with disempowerment, as a result of living in a patriarchal society. They seemed to have chosen the concept of 'trans/performance' in their practice to challenge the patriarchal vision of motherhood. American art historian Amelia Jones created the term 'trans/performance'<sup>13</sup> which is a means to interconnect two separate worlds through performance. An example of this is

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<sup>11</sup> O'Reilly, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 1

<sup>13</sup> Amelia Jones, "Introduction," *Performance Research* 21, no. 5 (September 2, 2016): 1–11.

when the domestic feminine realms that are traditionally associated with the private are taken into a gallery space. American artist Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)<sup>14</sup> is a good example of 'trans/performance'. The work is a six-minute long video where the artist uses parody to critique the commodification of woman's role in the kitchen. The kitchen becomes a site for resistance and the audience witnesses this rebellion in a gallery space.

Performing motherhood across private and public spaces underlines the ability of artist mothers to be versatile and in flux. Artist mothers are thought to be in "in-between" or "inter/"mezzo" according to Australian the contemporary philosopher and feminist theorician Rosi Braidotti because women's identity is unstable and fluctuating.<sup>15</sup> This may be attributed to the fact that artist mothers need to be adaptable given the roles and responsibilities required in raising children and in maintaining an art practice. This further supports the way that 'trans/performance' draws attention to motherhood as an embodied experience of continuous becoming. Repeated daily, this shifts motherhood beyond its patriarchal constructs. The notion of 'trans/performance' can be used to make the boundary of 'motherhood' more porous and extends it beyond the spaces usually associated with mothers, such as the domestic environment, the school yard, and the playground.

European artist mothers Ildikó Rippel and Rosie Garton have employed the notion of 'trans/performance' to investigate the maternal 'Real' as per

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<sup>14</sup> Martha Rosler, *Semiotics in the Kitchen*, YouTube, accessed November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZympOIGCo>

<sup>15</sup> Katarzyna Kosmala. "Becoming Imperceptible M/Other: Negotiating Porous Multiple Selves." *N.Paradoxa : International Feminist Art Journal* 39: 86–95. Accessed August 10, 2018. <http://www.ktpress.co.uk/article-abstract.asp>.

psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan through their work, *Under the Covers* (2012).<sup>16</sup> Lacan identified three orders as part of the development of the psyche: the 'Imaginary', the 'Symbolic' and the 'Real'. The 'Imaginary' is defined as the perception of oneself, or the ego. The 'Symbolic' is defined by language and signifiers whereas the 'Real' is the opposite of the 'Symbolic' and resists representation. It occurs when an experience creates a response that has no words to explain it; such experience can be a trauma or a rupture through which the 'Real' emerges.<sup>17</sup> Garton asserts that we can only encounter the 'Real' through a traumatic experience, a rupture, through which the 'Real' can radiate.<sup>18</sup> Rippel and Garton view the experience of becoming 'mother' as an interruption of subjectivity. A mother becomes a new subject once her baby is born. Until the mother becomes a new subject, her identity is unknown. At that particular point in time, a rupture occurs between the moment when the mother knows who she is and when she does not know who she has become. During the rupture, the mother connects with the 'Real'. It is during this moment of unknowing that 'Rapture' occurs. This term is defined by Julia Kristeva as a sense of violent bliss.

In *Under the covers*, Rippel and Garton refer to the performance work of Zoo Indigo when they perform the maternal 'Real'. Indigo's work views the maternal as a catalyst for the emergence of the 'Real' in theatre. In *Under the*

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<sup>16</sup> Ildikó Rippel and Rosie Garton. 2017. "Maternal Ruptures/Raptures." *Performance Research* 22, no. 4: 36.

<sup>17</sup> Lebartlehara, "Explain in simple terms? Lacan's Imaginary, Symbolic and Real," *Reddit r/askphilosophy* (forum)2015, [https://www.reddit.com/r/askphilosophy/comments/31p3xx/explain\\_in\\_simple\\_terms\\_lacans\\_imaginary\\_symbolic/](https://www.reddit.com/r/askphilosophy/comments/31p3xx/explain_in_simple_terms_lacans_imaginary_symbolic/)

<sup>18</sup> Ildikó Rippel, and Rosie Garton. 2017. "Maternal Ruptures/Raptures." *Performance Research* 22, no. 4: 36.

*Covers*, Rippel and Garton's work projects their sleeping children on a screen, through a live SKYPE feed. Both Rippel and Garton are present as performing bodies, as lactating mothers on stage. Their lines are performed until the performance is interrupted by an infant crying which triggers the respective mother's breasts to leak milk. At this moment, the performer stops performing and is brought back to being a mother. It is at this point that the performer connects with the maternal which engenders the 'Real'. The audience sees the performed mother and the performing mother and witness the maternal 'Real'.

Aside from Rippel and Garton's performance focusing on this interconnecting space, other artist mothers have also aimed at bridging the intimate space generally related to motherhood within the public sphere. Using a wide range of artistic media, such as writing, photography, video, textiles, installation and sculpture, these artists have attempted to create new narratives surrounding motherhood. This supports Dorothea von Hantelmann's point of view where art has a potential to create social and political change in addition to fulfilling an aesthetic experience.<sup>19</sup>

Authors Amber Kinser, Kryn Freehling-Burton, and Terri Hawkes have collaborated on a book, *Performing Motherhood: Artistic, Activist, and Everyday Enactment*<sup>20</sup> which explores how artists mothers have used their performance art to empower themselves and others on the topic of motherhood. This book contains a collection of stories and essays about the relationship

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<sup>19</sup> Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art : The Meaning of Art's Performativity*. (Zurich: Les Presses du Réel, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Amber Kinser, Kryn Freehling-Burton, & Terri Hawkes. *Performing Motherhood: Artistic, Activist, and Everyday Enactment*. (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2014).

between motherhood and performance told through the lived experiences of artists who are mothers themselves. Through art, activism and the act of daily mothering, the book explores how artist mothers have used a multidisciplinary approach to give agency to their role as mothers. It highlights various means of negotiations with the social constructs surrounding the image of what a mother ought to be and how she should perform.

One of the artists featured in this publication is Laura Endacott, a Canadian artist, whose textiles reclaim traditional feminine craft and integrates the concept of motherhood into the public sphere. In her essay, *Performing the Maternal in Public Space*,<sup>21</sup> she speaks about the idea of transference. This concept is key to her public performances as it opens up a discourse surrounding the invisibility of motherhood. Transference can be seen in her performance *Phantom Vessel* (2013) (Fig. 1 & Fig. 2).<sup>22</sup> where she performs near the Canal Lachine, in Montreal, Canada. She proposes a connection between a biological mother and a symbolic mother through walking around holding a large-scale textile sculpture, *Phantom vessel* Held up with inserted plastic poles, the sculpture assists the process that initiates conversations that share concerns and thoughts about maternal realities. During the performance, both the artist and the participant hold one end of the sculpture through adjustable sleeves. In this way it moves freely in an improvised manner. Sometimes the artist and participant exchange words and at other times they

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<sup>21</sup> Laura Endacott, "Performing the Maternal in Public Space", eds. A. Kinser, K. Freehling-Burton, & T. Hawkes. *Performing Motherhood: Artistic, Activist, and Everyday Enactment*. (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2014): 55.

<sup>22</sup> Laura Endacott. "Locating Motherhood." *Liminalities* 12:3 (2016), 1.

communicate by eye contact. The sculpture is a metaphor for a boat, a bridge, or a shelter depending on how it is held. It speaks to the challenges confronted in motherhood. The fact that this performance was held outside the traditional gallery space enabled other encounters and conversation on motherhood that would not have necessarily occurred otherwise. For example, one of the participants, Anne Pilon, who had a background in dance and acting shared with Endacott how *Phantom Vessel* enabled her to perform freely. The participant felt she often had to pretend to be someone during auditions in order to get work. The performance with this textile sculpture empowered Pilon to be more authentic to herself. Endacott was seeking these kind of experiences during such collaborative public performances. A space is created for the maternal in the public realm as a form of new expressions of motherhood in contemporary art.



This image has been removed by this author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Fig.1: Laura Endacott, *Phantom Vessel*, 2013.

This image has been removed by this author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Fig.2: Laura Endacott and participant. *Phantom Vessel*, 2013.

Like Endacott, the American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles is also concerned with the exclusion of maternal everyday reality from the public sphere. After the birth of her first child she developed the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969):

*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, renewing, 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.*

Mierle Laderman Ukeles <sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Elena Marchevska, "Performing Everyday Maternal Practice: Activist Structures in Creative Work," *Studies in the Maternal* 8, no.2 (2016): 11.

This seminal performance work that became a part of her series *Maintenance Art Works 1969-1980*<sup>24</sup> shed some light on these concerns. One project included *Hartford Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside* (1973) (Fig.4), which is a four-hour performance where she scrubs and mops the front steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum. The idea behind the project arose following her growing frustration about all the work surrounding the care of her children. Ukeles was critiquing what she perceived as the hierarchy of different forms of work, especially domestic work. Her work evidenced how the labour involved in motherhood was unacknowledged in Western society at the time. Ukeles shed light on this through her performances that made visible the invisible. Her series, the *Maintenance Art Works* (1969-1980), promoted a recognition of [maternal] labour as work.

With *Touch Sanitation* she aimed to shake the hands of all the sanitation workers in New York. She wanted the rest of the world to acknowledge that without the sanitation workers, the city would fall into disarray. Recognising invisible labour, she also highlighted that mothering is also important and indispensable. Without such a hands-on approach, as was utilised in *Touch Sanitation*, children would not be cared for. They would not be fed, washed or comforted and there would not be food prepared for the table, or purchased to fill the refrigerator.

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<sup>24</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance Art Works 1969-1970*, accessed October 28, 2019, <http://www.ima.org.au/mierle-laderman-ukeles-maintenance-art-works-1969-1980/>



Fig.3: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance*, 1983.

The works of both Endacott and Ukeles supports the point of view of Lisa Baraitser<sup>25</sup> who proposed that mothering occurs beyond the private domestic sphere and transforms the public sphere into a transitional space.<sup>26</sup> In activating public spaces with the maternal body and gestures, it exposes and validates the labouring maternal body. As such, performing mothering enables a form of activism that counters the lack of recognition surrounding maternal

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<sup>25</sup> Lisa Baraitser is Professor of Psychosocial Theory at the University of London.

<sup>26</sup> Lisa Baraitser, "Mothers Who Make Things Public," *Feminist Review*, no. 93 (2009): 10.

creative work. Exploring motherhood in contemporary art is still a field that has yet to be established.

American conceptual artist Mary Kelly was one of the first woman artists to investigate the relationship between mother and child using text, nappy liners and embroidery in *Post-Partum Document* or *PPD* (1976) (Fig.4)<sup>27</sup>. Instead of using the presence of the maternal body in her works like the aforementioned performance artists, Kelly speaks of the maternal through the documentation of the interactions between mother and son. She did so with diary entries, framed stained nappies from her son, and psychoanalytical drawings about her son's development. The work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan inspired the psychoanalytical aspect of this project. It investigated the mother's desire for her child through the relationship she had with him, in addition to how the child interrelated with the 'Symbolic'. In the *PPD*, the artist mother expressed her frustration in *Document II – Why don't I understand?* when she discovered her son's awareness of another language that she did not understand. This event breaks the imaginary bond between the son and mother. The son identifies with a language different to the mother's. As the mother, Kelly realises her negative place in the Symbolic order. In order to make up for the loss of the mother-child dyad, she fervently documents the development of her son and claims her own separate identity as an artist.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* (London ; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 11.

<sup>28</sup> Becky, "Art + Identity - Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document," [Art and today – thap1211 studio theory spi studio 2009](#) (blog), August 6.

The exhibition of this work was controversial due to the presence of dirty nappies. The audience expected to see the maternal through more stereotypical depictions such as portraits of the mother and child. The lack of photography and any commodifiable works in the exhibition challenged the expectations of what art ought to be. Furthermore, *PPD* put a woman's experience at the forefront of conceptual art which was emerging at the time. It also tackled the topic of the division of labour in child-rearing. In the 1970s, this was a topic that had yet to be addressed.

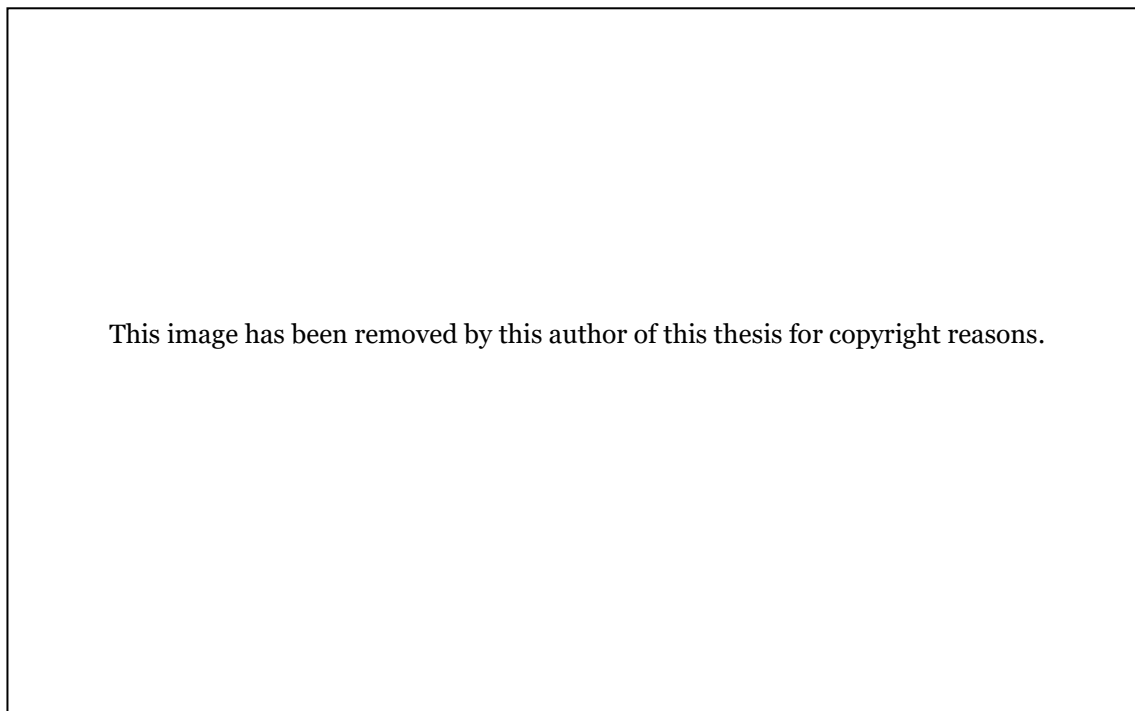


Fig. 4: Mary Kelly, detail of *Post-Partum Document Introduction*, 1981

## HOW CAN MOTHERING FIT WITH MAKING ART?

During the research for this paper it became apparent that literature about having an art practice while mothering was difficult to find. The subject appears to be a developing field. Australian freelance author Rachel Power wrote

*Creativity and Motherhood: The Divided Heart*,<sup>29</sup> which is a collection of interviews with mothers who are artists, writers and musicians. Power addressed the social constructs surrounding motherhood in the book. The difficulty in caring for children and tending to domestic chores, let alone attempting to be creative was highlighted. Overall, the book implied that these tasks were unquestionably attributed to mothers and not shared. The interviewees struggled trying to balance motherhood with an artistic career. Overall, the book seemed not to be about encouraging mothers to take agency about their role as mothers. Rather, it was about finding a means to maintain a career in spite of being a mother.

Online communities, such as the *Cultural ReProducers*,<sup>30</sup> gave support to this ambition. This platform was created in 2012 by the artist mother Christine Doner. Her website is a valuable online resource for artists of all fields who are parents and have an interest in making the art world more inclusive. Examples of resources include interviews with artist-parents sharing their experience as practicing artists. They also share their stories as parents. The website even provides links to some funding sites for artist-parents. In addition, there is an extensive list of publications on the topic of art and ‘parent-/motherhood’. Also featured are online projects and a list of groups around the world, including their current and ongoing events. Given that artist-parents are sometimes only capable of becoming visible online it seems that this website is of great value for networking, collaborating and learning.

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<sup>29</sup> Rachel Power, *The divided Heart: Art and Motherhood* (Fitzroy: Red Dog, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> [www.culturalreproducers.com](http://www.culturalreproducers.com)

Another online resource is *Spilt Milk Gallery*<sup>31</sup>. This artist-led social enterprise is located in Edinburgh, Scotland. Their main goal is to promote the work of artists who are mothers. It was created by an artist mother, Lauren McLaughlin. This website features the artworks of the artist mothers who are members of the gallery. Through variable income memberships, an artist-mother can have their artwork, website, and social handles listed on the *Spilt Gallery* website, as well as have their artwork marketed on their online shop. There is a blog featuring interviews with each member. Practical resources about raising children and making art is not available on the website. These may only be accessible once one becomes a member as the website appears more focused on marketing and promotion.

In terms of local contributions to the field of art and motherhood, the artist of this research has participated in collaborative projects as part of the group *Art/Parents* and participated in *Doing Feminism Residency* (2017) at the Norma Redpath, and in *F Generation exhibition* at the George Paton Gallery (2015).<sup>32</sup> The resulting creative outcomes were inspiring but were not addressing how to maintain an art practice while raising children.

In spite of these resources, it still seemed to be a gap to fill which prompted the desire to conduct this research. The next chapter will demonstrate how a single artist mother's four strategies can reveal, through artworks, the labour involved in both raising children and making art.

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<sup>31</sup> [www.spiltmilkgallery.com](http://www.spiltmilkgallery.com)

<sup>32</sup> Clare Rae, Nina Ross, Hanna Tai, Jessie Scott, Gabrielle de Vietri, Clare Nedham, and Lizzy Sampson have all been part of the *Art/Parents* group since its inception.

## CHAPTER 2: STRATEGIES

## WHEN THE PERSONAL BECOMES POLITICAL

For this research day-to-day experience as an artist mother became the source material for an autoethnographic methodology. This process of analysis was initiated where at one point in time, the artist mother's creative pursuits, or needs, were not supported by her marriage. It is not uncommon for a mother to put her career on hold during childrearing. It is quite a different matter if the mother has not chosen to do so. This is when the personal becomes political. The image of the 'mother' as completely devoted to her children and family, in spite of her needs and desires, can be challenged through visual means. For this purpose this project has utilised a wide range of media such as sculpture, photography, installation and video.

The idealized projected image of what a mother should be can trigger feelings of anxiety and of inadequacy. A mother's role and responsibility are extensive and dependent on her needs and those of her children and family. This adds complexity to individual situations yet this research does not see art and the work involved in mothering<sup>33</sup> as mutually exclusive. Instead, each role informs the other. As such, this research aims to contribute to changing the discourse on the image of the mother. A matricentric feminist lens has informed the development of creative tactics that have enabled mothering and practicing art simultaneously.

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<sup>33</sup> Mothering is defined by Sara Ruddick as protecting, nurturing, and training.

This investigation offers an opportunity to make the boundaries surrounding motherhood more porous. It is hoped that this extends this activity beyond a private practice and into the public sphere. To achieve this, Amelia Jones' concept of 'trans/performance' has been used to challenge the preconceived ideas of what a mother should be. In this space, this practice has moved beyond the invisible spaces of mothers being the domestic, the school, the playground. Here the private sphere of a mother's work is exposed through a transitional space within an institutional setting. The performative is used to link, mediate, interrelate and connect the maternal labouring body into visibility.

This research has aimed to merge an art practice into everyday life experience informed by mother-centred feminism. Here the idea was to devise a series of strategies to maintain the roles and responsibilities of both mothering and artistic practice. The devised strategies serve as a conduit between the tasks involved in raising children and the tasks involved in maintaining an art practice. These propositions are similar to maintenance exercises, where a series of artworks were given a prescribed deadline. The resultant artworks were created using a combination of skills like photography, sewing, video production and welding. The acquisition of new skills was also necessary, with mould-making and object casting added to the list. The ultimate goal was to demonstrate how an artist mother conveys her 'artist-motherness' artistically. In doing so, this form of inquiry aimed to create an insight into how an artist mother navigates the contemporary art world in Melbourne.

The series of *Strategies* resulted in a diverse range of outcomes. They included a mounted black and white photograph, an installation of sandbags, sculptures of the artist's arm and a video work. Some of these involved the artist's children and aimed to expose the intermingling of mothering practice and art practice.

## STRATEGY #1: REDEFINING MOTHER THROUGH PORTRAITURE

The traditional depiction of motherhood defines women from a biological perspective. However, maternity is an abstract concept that shapes and reshapes the identity of the mother. The myth of the all-caring, all-forgiving, all-sacrificing must end. When mothers challenge the seemingly patriarchal construct of motherhood, they are considered defiant and deviant. Society often also makes judgements about them. A mother's self-determination can also challenge the dynamic of a heteronormative family structure in patriarchal society. The perception of a 'good mother' is further reinforced by the reductive dichotomy of the 'good' and 'bad' mother. This is an attitude that still seems to predominate.

Women artists have challenged the archetype of the 'good' mother. An example of this is American artist Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (Fig. 5).<sup>34</sup> Opie is shown with her naked child held up to her chest suckling her

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<sup>34</sup> Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004, chromogenic print, accessed September 6<sup>th</sup> 2019, [www.guggenheim.com](http://www.guggenheim.com)

breast. The word “Pervert” is scratched and just visible on her chest.<sup>35</sup> The artist does not stare into the camera. Despite this portrait taking on a traditional ‘Mother and Child’ pose, it contests traditional religious imagery often associated with the mother. Opie, big boned, ruddy faced and large breasted projects a more progressive image of the mother. She represents the new mother, the other, the real, the transgressive, the intersectional. This portrait depicts a queering of motherhood. Contemporary family portraiture is used to investigate the idea of otherness and neo-maternalism, as a non-stereotypical mother.

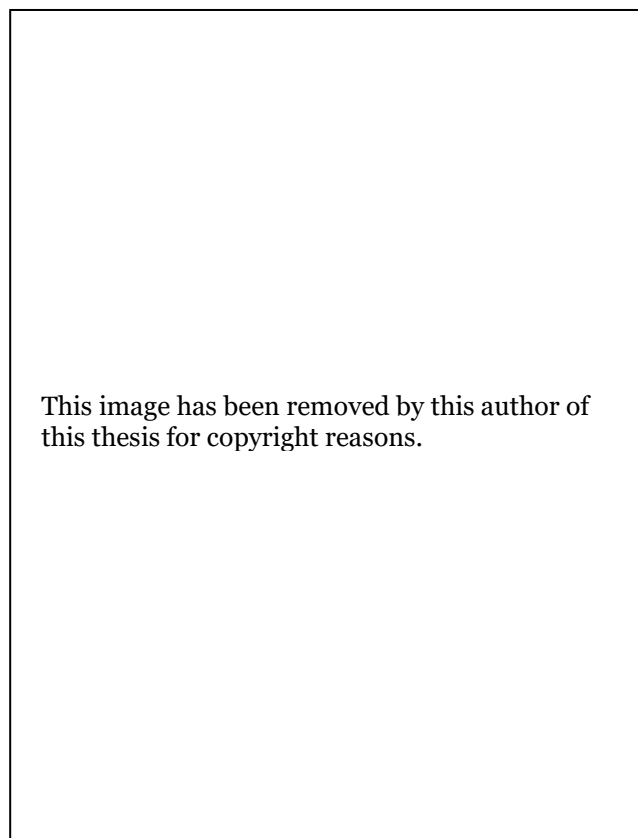


Fig. 5: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004.

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<sup>35</sup> The scar featured on Opie’s chest is a remnant of a previous work, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, where she wore a full sado-masochist outfit with a mask, topless and with forty-six metal pins inserted in her arms. The presence of the scar in *Self-Portrait/Nursing* attempts to subvert the heteronormative portraits of mother and child.

While Opie aimed to redefine motherhood subjectivity through transgression, Strategy #1 of this project applied a similar method. Using portraiture, *Hold* (2019) (Fig.6) represents the artist and mother through a black-and-white fiber-based photograph set in a landscape (Merri Creek). It portrays the artist holding both her children at the same time: one on her front and one on her back. The artist as subject activates the mother's identity by holding her children. Just like in Rippel and Garton's *Under the covers*, the maternal activates the Lacanian 'Real'. Therefore, this portrait of a subject as both artist and mother, connects the long-established private associated with mothering to the public realm. This exemplifies how trans/performance can create a blurring of the boundaries as a way of highlighting maternal invisibility in a public sphere.



Fig.6: Claudia Pharès, Detail *Strategy #1: Hold*, 2019.

Another artist who investigated the concept of invisibility however in a more literal manner is the American artist Lee Lozano. She decided to absent herself from the art scene as a social experiment. This lasted three decades and was known as *Dropout Piece* (1970). She aimed to make visible the superficiality and elitism of the art scene, especially when art was made for commercial purposes.<sup>36</sup> Lozano's 'performance,' through her absence, is not dissimilar to the work of the Israeli-French artist Absalon. In his series of works called *Cells* (Fig. 7 & 8), Absalon chose to put himself into voluntary isolation as a way to reject conformism. He isolated himself inside these minimalist man-made white structures which were usually sited on the periphery of big cities.<sup>37</sup> With each installation he would inhabit one of these structures as part of a durational performance. His work resonates from the margins, speaking to the notion of the artist mother who needs to institute voluntary isolation to experience privacy; this is often lost after the birth of children.

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<sup>36</sup> Natalie Bell, "Monographic Texts on key figures and themes," in *The great mother : women, maternity, and power in art and visual culture, 1900-2015 / an exhibition curated by Massimiliano Gioni* Milan: Skira, 2015), 352.

<sup>37</sup> Luis Camnitzer, "Absalon," *Third Text* (9), 31(2008): 101–104, doi: 10.1080/09528829508576554.

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Fig. 7: Absalon, *Prototype Cellules*, 1992.<sup>38</sup>

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Fig.8: Absalon, *Cell No.1*, 1992.

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<sup>38</sup> Mark Prince, "Review: Absalon, Berlin, at KW Institute of Contemporary Art," *Art In America*, published March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011, <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/absalon/>

Using performances about escapism was a way to regain control, and agency, of needs and desires. This research aimed to emphasise that an all-giving, all-loving, selfless mother was unrealistic. Some earlier propositions in this series include *I cannot easily shake off the village.-Thoreau* (2017) (Fig. 9), *Self-care* (2016) (Fig. 10), *Tent* (2017) (Fig. 11). Each of them was built to perform a type of voluntary isolation to defy the perceived invisibility experienced as an artist mother. Designed to ‘perform’ in a public space: they appeared as part of the peripheral architectural landscape, much like Absalon’s *Cells*. Singling the self out from the masses was an attempt to enact a form of passive activism. This reflected the pressure to conform to a projected ideal. This use of the performing maternal body in open space was a measure used to engage the audience with maternal everyday realities. Mothering is durational and a social contract that remains undervalued. The staging of these performances was an act of voluntary isolation.



Fig. 9: Claudia Pharès, *I cannot easily shake off the village. -Thoreau*, 2017.



Fig. 10: Claudia Pharès, *Tent*, 2017.



Fig. 11: Claudia Pharès, *Self-Care*, 2016.

In *Hold* the artist stands strong and stoic. No one looks into the camera. Everyone stares to the right of the frame. This image represents the weight of motherhood. The subject stands firmly on the edge of the land, where the shore meets the river. This unconventional self-portrait shares some aspects with the portrait, *Migrant Mother* (Fig. 12)<sup>39</sup> by the American documentary photographer Dorothea Lange. Lange was commissioned to document the lives of poor migrant Americans during the Depression era. In this portrait from her series, a mother with a weathered face looks away from the camera while holding a baby in her arms. There are two other children on either side of her with their heads turned away from the camera. The mother's right fingers are posed resting on her right cheek. The pathos of the scene was successfully captured through the portrait of Florence Thompson.<sup>40</sup> She was thirty two at the time and pictured with three of her seven children as an icon of suffering during the Depression era. As a mother she looks haggard in soiled dusty clothes and her children look just as impoverished wearing torn dirty clothes. The portrait evokes a mother's sense of fear and concern about her children and their living conditions. American writer Susan Sontag wrote eloquently about how photography elicits empathy and social conscience<sup>41</sup> in *Regarding the Pain of Others*<sup>42</sup>. *Hold* attempts to elicit similar thought processes through a recognition and validation of a mother's work.

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<sup>39</sup> Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936, [https://library-artstor.org.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/asset/LOCEON\\_1039795885](https://library-artstor.org.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/asset/LOCEON_1039795885).

<sup>40</sup> Anonymous. "The story behind the image: Susan Sontag". *My point of view* (blog), November 3, 2013, <https://kingabska.wordpress.com/tag/susan-sontag/>

<sup>41</sup> The image was published and elicited a relief fund of \$US20,000 to the camp where Florence was located at the time of the photo shoot. Unfortunately, she had already left the premises. In a recent interview Florence's daughter claims that her mother asked Dorothea to not publish the photos. Little did she know she would become an icon. Florence said she never received a penny from this image.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

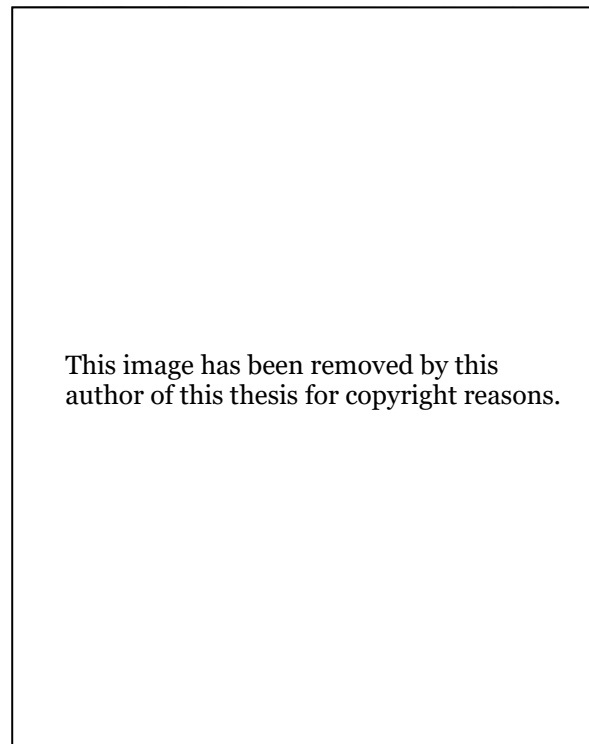


Fig. 12: Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother*, 1936.

In the West, we read photographs from left to right; to the viewer we are facing to the right. In *Hold*, the subject seems to defiantly look into a future in front of them, away from the camera. She ignores the viewer and the opinions of the masses. In *Migrant Mother*, the mother looks away from the camera to the left. She is observed as if captured thinking, or daydreaming. This emphasises her vulnerability. Neither of her children are looking back at the camera. They deliberately deny access to their faces, maybe as a defiance.<sup>43</sup> The migrant mother demonstrates cooperation with the photographer yet the way that the right hand is positioned makes it look staged. This posing seems unnatural given the circumstances. *Hold* is also staged but the posture is more assertive.

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<sup>43</sup> Apparently the children were afraid of the photographer.

The vulnerability lies in the precarity of holding two children at the same time. It is a portrayal of the challenge in caring for two children who can barely fit into the mother's arms at the same time. The subject, an artist mother, suffers because of the weight she bears yet she stands stoically desiring them to be safe. Through her hold, the mother is trying to say "I've got you!" Control has been temporarily activated.

## STRATEGY #2: M-O-T-H-E-R AT PLAY WITH SAND

In line with the lack of visibility entailed in real motherhood, an installation of 200 sand-filled calico bags was set up in the room (Fig. 13-14). Viewed from the front, there are six rows of ten, or so, bags of 200 mm x 300 mm. They are stacked one on top of the other. Moving around to the other side of the pile, the word 'MOTHER' appears, stencilled in different colours on each bag. Some of the bags are piled in such a way that the word mother is partly concealed. Each bag is small enough to be carried by a child.

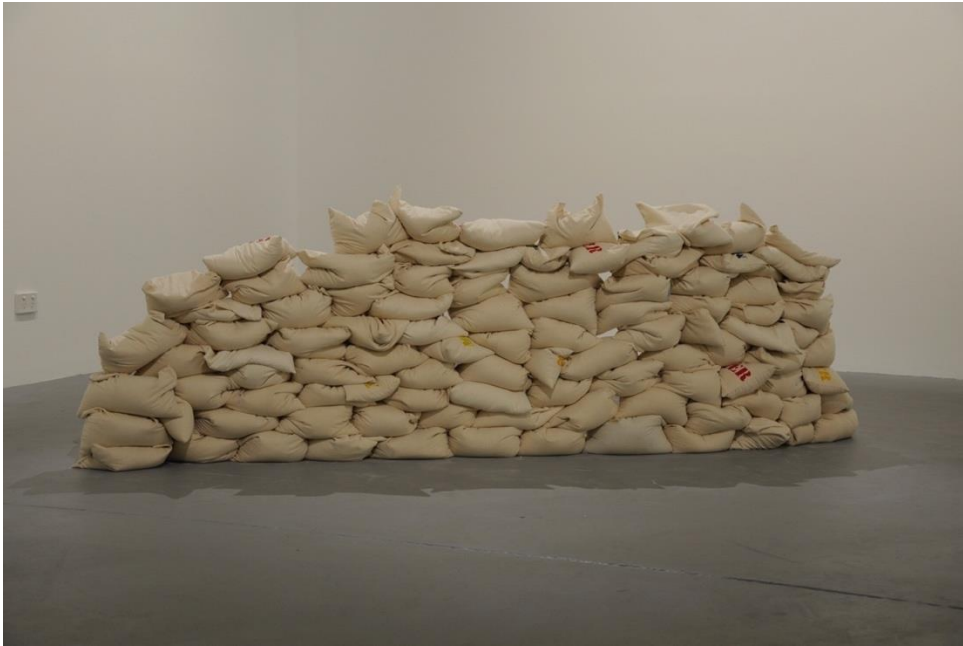


Fig. 13: Claudia Pharès, *Installation detail Strategy #2*, 2019.



Fig. 14: Claudia Pharès, *Installation detail, Strategy #2*, 2019.

For the installation the wall of sandbags, standing about 50 cm high, evokes a military checkpoint or hideout. It is also reminiscent of the barriers created for flood control. Security, protection and care are all evoked through a

mothers' work, or mothering. Protecting her children is part of a mother's social contract. The curved shape of the installation of sandbags is reminiscent of a mother's protective wing.

The concept of play is evoked through the stencilling work on the bags. Each of them is a reminder of the craft culture designed for children. In addition, the make-shift nature of the sandbag wall recalls the fort-like structures that children build out of snow in winter to play battle games. Usually there are two snow forts facing each other a few metres apart. From their safe vantage points children can then take turns throwing snowballs at each other much like a military operation.

This installation also alludes to the building and stacking exercises that all mothers have at some point taken part in with their child. This is one of the first milestone activities used to assess hand eye coordination. This enables children to process visual input into motor skills.<sup>44</sup> Also, it may motivate the child to try stacking again if the tower stack falls.<sup>45</sup> Strategy #2 is dedicated to mothers who are well versed in the repetitive processes involved in the folding, piling and stacking of dishes, clothes, toys, and books.

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<sup>44</sup> "Activities: stacking and building games", *Raising Children Network*, <https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/stacking-and-building-games#stacking-and-building-games-why-theyre-good-for-children-nav-title>

<sup>45</sup> My son helped me install the sandbags. Wherever the bags would reach a certain height, the wall would collapse. It just so happened that it would collapse at the last spot where my son would stack the bag. He would try to stack it up again. Then later elsewhere, it would happen again. I was getting impatient and anxious because I was running out of time. The opening was just in a couple of hours and I had to leave to pick up my daughter. I experienced a major dilemma: let my son enjoy the process and not get things done or take over. I told my son to go play outside.

*I do, I undo, I redo.*

Louise Bourgeois<sup>46</sup>

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The space where the artworks are installed is a site that bridges the private into the public. The sand bags were fabricated in a kitchen/dining area. These areas are used by women and mothers in most family dwellings.<sup>47</sup> Gathered around the kitchen table are a stack of pre-cut calico fabrics, various tubes of coloured acrylic paints and two different stencils spelling the word 'MOTHER'. Each piece of fabric is imprinted with 'MOTHER' in a different colour. One by one, the freshly painted printed fabrics are hung to air dry on the clothes air rack, on the kitchen bench, and on the adjacent furniture (Fig.15 to 17). The space is taken over by 'MOTHER' physically and metaphorically.

French philosopher Luce Irigaray addresses the construction of the gender in *The Sex Which Is Not One* (1985). As such, Irigaray proposes that space is gendered and that the private has been associated with 'feminine' and the public with 'masculine'.<sup>48</sup> This is particularly evident in the architecture that most families occupy. The writer Virginia Woolf raised this in *A Room of One's*

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<sup>46</sup> [https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/book\\_report/louise-bourgeois-phaidon-folio-54962](https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/book_report/louise-bourgeois-phaidon-folio-54962)

<sup>47</sup> That is where all the lunch box and meal preparation occur, as well as the meal sharing. The kitchen table becomes a multipurpose area where art is made and food is consumed and a thesis is written. These activities are all part of the art maintenance of the artist-mother. The private repetitive nature of these activities were quintessential in the making of these sandbags. The latter embody the work metaphorically and physically for an audience to experience.

<sup>48</sup> Andrea Wheeler, "About Being-Two in an Architectural Perspective: Interview with Luce Irigaray." *Journal of Romantic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2004): 91–108.

*Own*<sup>49</sup> where she stated that for a woman to have her own space, or room, would imply coming from a wealthy family. Rooms allocated specifically for women were traditionally uncommon compared to the studies which were designed for the men of the house. Unless, the family could afford it, women did not have their own space. By installing home-made sandbags in a gallery space, the prevailing stereotypes associated with domestic space are subverted.

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The first part of the production of this installation began one afternoon over the Labour Day long weekend. Around two hundred rectangles were cut from calico fabric. The word 'MOTHER' was then stencilled on each bag using a range of different colours. The fabrication of these bags was like an assembly line which was very suggestive of women's work in factories during WWII. The word 'MOTHER' was stencilled and left to dry (Fig. 15 and Fig. 15.1) ; then, the bags were sewn (Fig. 16); then filled with sand (Fig. 17). The artist's children (Fig. 17) were involved in this process. Their well appreciated voluntary labour was given at various times, even though their participation was optional. There was some trepidation that they would resent participating in the project which could put at stake their cooperation in future art-related activities. Activities like driving to the studio, or the workshop, or attending their mother's opening had to be made into something that could be enjoyed as a family. There was a conscious effort in making the children feel free to choose to participate in this

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<sup>49</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, Panther: St. Albans, 1977.

project. They helped apply stencils to the bags, sewing the bags and filling them in with sand.

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What is the difference between choice and obligation? For a mother who chose to become one, one has to do what has to be done - to mother- besides nurturing, caring, and protecting.<sup>50</sup> A mother has a choice about how to mother, which is unique to her values and beliefs. It can sometimes be challenging to resist societal expectations to be a certain way. One example is the way that child rearing still seems to be gendered.<sup>51</sup> Women tend to take time off work to raise their children while the fathers continue to work. In addition, the labour taken to raise children still seems to be undermined and difficult to give a value to. The factory-like production of the sandbags brings up the dichotomy in value of the waged work of women in factories and the unwaged work of women raising children. Domestic and child-rearing labour remains unrecognised. This is a problem that has yet to be resolved.

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<sup>50</sup> cook, clean, nurse, drive, teach, volunteer, attend and host parties, organise playdates, discipline, plan holidays, menu plan

<sup>51</sup> Renata Anderson, Amy Webster and Mischa Barr have published in the Journal *Women's Health Issues*, Nov. 2018, an article entitled "Great Expectations: How Gendered Expectations Shape Early Mothering Experiences". The article suggests that in transforming gender norms and structures into a more gender equal world would promote better mothering experiences where women would feel supported and less prone to feelings of stress failure and isolation.



Fig. 15: Claudia Pharès, *Detail production, Strategy #2*, 2019.



Fig.15.1: Claudia Pharès, *Detail production, Strategy #2*, 2019.



Fig. 16: Claudia Pharès, *Detail production, Strategy #2*, 2019.



Fig. 17: Claudia Pharès. *Detail production, Strategy #2*, 2019.



Fig. 18: Claudia Pharès. *Detail production, Strategy #2, 2019.*

Child-rearing labour is mundane, yet necessary. The weight, the pressure and the stacking reflect the weight of the responsibilities entailed in mothering. It also echoes the anchoring that a mother's comfort can provide. From one perspective only a few stencilled letters appear, inviting the viewer in for a closer look. On closer examination, hundreds of stencilled 'MOTHERS' are exposed. The font used most commonly appears on large stamps on official documents. It is imposing just as the overall structure aims to be.

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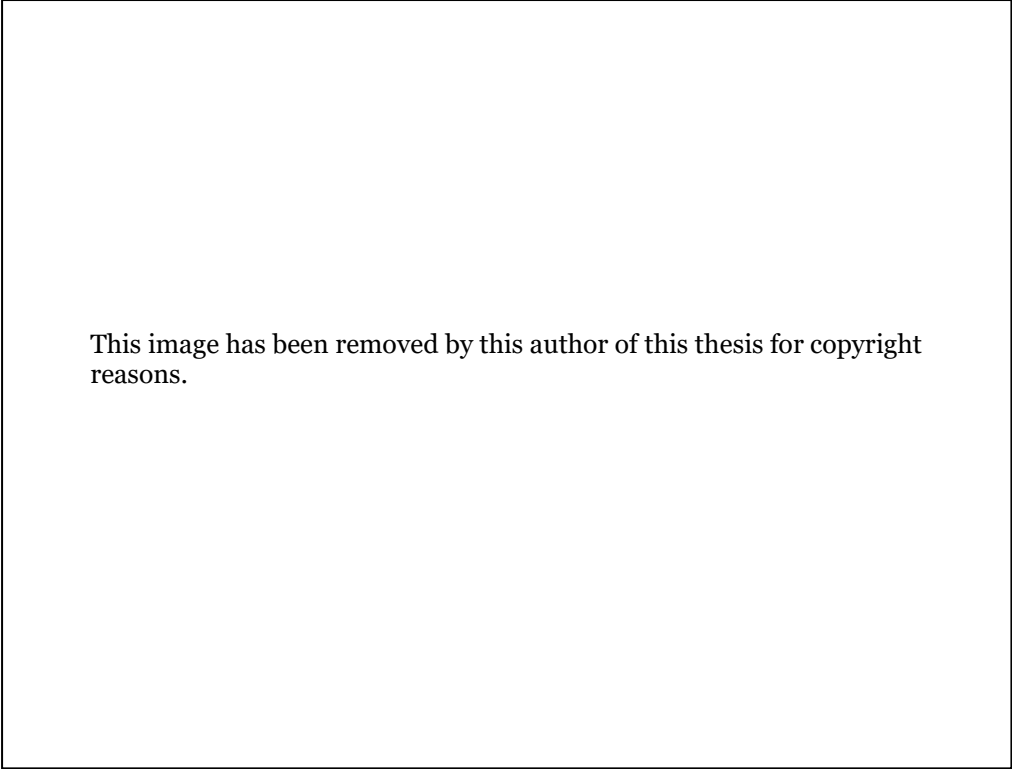
The bags were machine sewn together into rectangular bags with one side left open. More than 400kg of play sand was used as filler. The sand was wet

and had to be aired out on a tarp in the garage; 20 kg of sand was emptied and dried each time. Then each bag was filled and handstitched shut. The children helped fill the bags. There was a production line happening in the garage (Fig.18). Most of the hand stitching occurred while the children were watching their favorite TV show after dinner. It became a little ritual. Sometimes a few extra bags were stitched after putting the children to bed. At other times, the activity would occur during a long phone conversation, or while listening to podcasts. It was meditative and the joy of completing another bag intoxicating.

Behind the scenes, the cutting, stencilling, sewing, filling, and stitching was as repetitive as motherwork. The invisibility of motherhood had become palpable, much like in Australian artist Helen Grace's photograph, *Women seem to adapt to repetitive-type tasks* (1981) (Fig. 19).<sup>52</sup> This photo series shows a row of cloth nappies hanging on a clothesline. The labour involved in keeping children clean among everything else is tangible. One can only imagine the daily chore involved in hand washing and air drying cloth nappies before the arrival of disposable nappies. Grace's work was first seen at the Monash Gallery of Art for the exhibition "Photography meets feminism: Australian women photographers 1970s-80s". Motherwork is repetitive and tedious. Another bag is like another cloth nappy on the line or like another day with the children.

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<sup>52</sup> Helen Grace, *Women seem to adapt to repetitive-type tasks*, 1981, exhibition detail, <https://artblart.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/installation-aw-web.jpg>



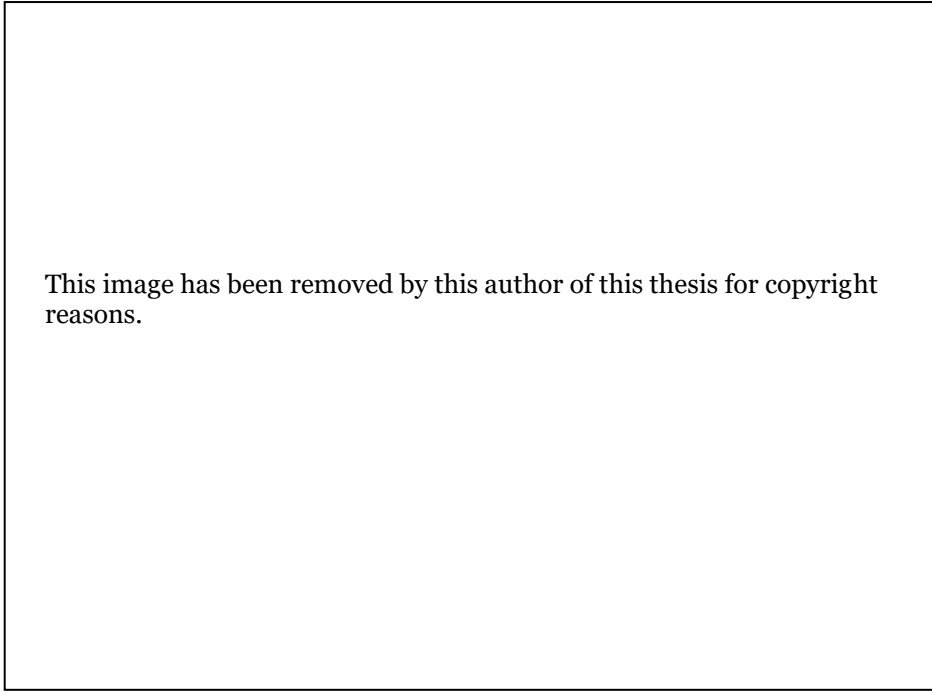
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Fig.19: Helen Grace, *Women seem to adapt to repetitive-type tasks*, 1981.

Another artwork that comments on mother-related domestic chores is the playful work of American artist Christina Kelly.<sup>53</sup> Here the artist reinterprets a pocket puzzle (Fig. 20) where plastic squares move up and down to make words and phrases. In this artwork, the artist wrote on each square the tasks she needed to perform each day: “Play with Huck”, “Make love”, “Studio time”. There is something humorous about reducing daily tasks to a game.

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<sup>53</sup> Christina Kelly, *Untitled*, 2012, [http://createquity.com/wpcontent/uploads/2012/08/IMG\\_10091.jpg](http://createquity.com/wpcontent/uploads/2012/08/IMG_10091.jpg)



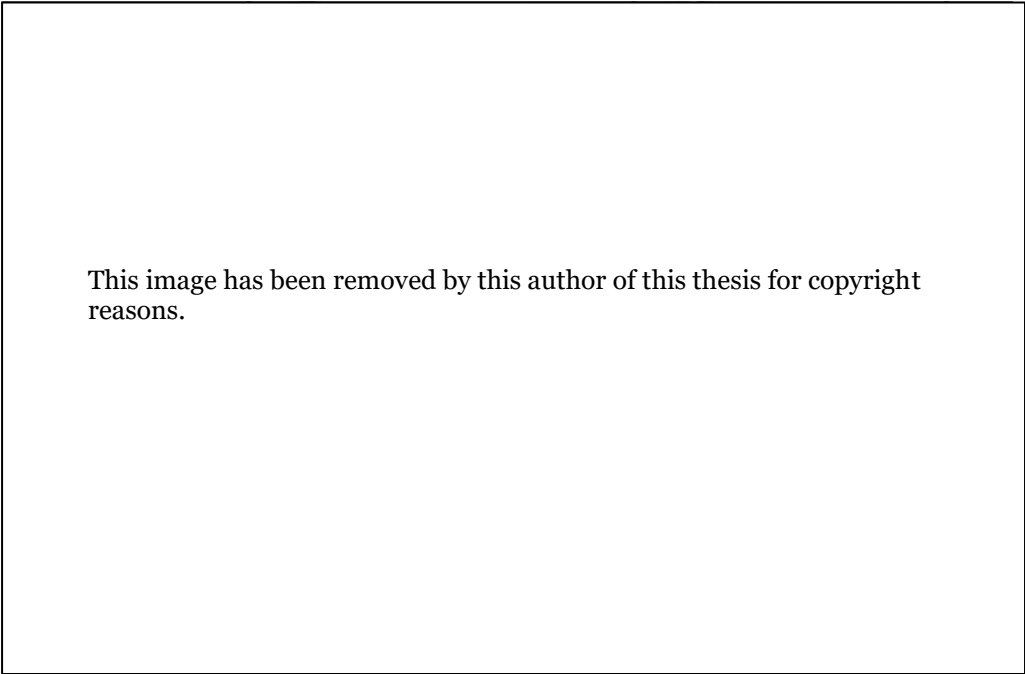
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Fig.20: Christina Kelly, *Untitled*, 2012.

Both of these artworks demonstrate the inexorable tediousness of motherhood and challenge the romantic myths of motherhood found in contemporary advertising and popular culture. Mothering is more than cuddling children and playing games. There is a whole production behind the scenes which needs to take place for the children to be nurtured, protected and educated. The tasks involved in raising children are often repetitive and mundane yet essential. Such tasks appear to be dismissed as legitimate work or labour. Failing to acknowledge the complexities entailed in raising children is undermining the work involved in mothering.

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The barricade of sandbags used in *Strategy #2* offers a visually imposing structure. Overall, it aimed to evoke a similar idea as British artist Martin Creed's installation at Hauser & Wirth Gallery in 2011 which consisted of a 12.5 m by 2.4 m sculpture, 'MOTHERS' (Fig. 21) which was composed of only a giant neon text. Filling the room with huge capital letters it spun, flashed, rotated on a wooden frame and the audience walked underneath it. As a singular statement it dominated the room with only the word 'MOTHERS'. This made a very powerful statement about motherhood with its imposing dimensions. A mother's presence is commanding as quintessential for enabling life. One can only be born of a mother. Creed's installation celebrates the importance of mothers in our lives using scale, lights and mechanics as a strategy to convey the message.



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Fig. 21: Martin Creed, *Mothers*, 2011.

### STRATEGY #3: A MOTHER'S ACHILLES' HEEL

To activate the exhibition space several sculptures (Fig. 22 & 23) representing an arm were anchored to the floors, walls and ceiling. Made out of white wax and white acrylic these castings, of the artist's right arm, depict a gesture of 'pushing against.' Each arm is bent at the wrist and cropped just below the elbow. The arms are actively engaged around the gallery space mimicking the gesture of pushing against the framework of the space or supporting the gallery structure. The artist's right arm symbolises her Achilles' heel. The Achilles' refers to the tough tissue connecting the calf muscles to the heel bone. It enables one to stand on their toes.<sup>54</sup> Idiomatically, one's Achilles' heel is an expression that refers to someone's weakness in spite of their overall strength.<sup>55</sup> In Greek mythology, Achilles was foretold he would die young. His mother, Thetis, bathes him in the River Styx which was meant to make him invulnerable. His whole body was then protected except for his heel. Unfortunately, an arrow hit him right on the heel during a battle which took his life away.<sup>56</sup> This installation of several replicas of the artist mother's right arm represents her Achilles' heel. The mutability of wax makes these arm sculptures weak and conveys a sense of vulnerability.

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<sup>54</sup> Achilles tendon, *Health Direct*, accessed October 29 2019, <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/achilles-tendon>

<sup>55</sup> Achilles heel, *Wikipedia*, Accessed October 27 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achilles%27\\_heel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achilles%27_heel)

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 49

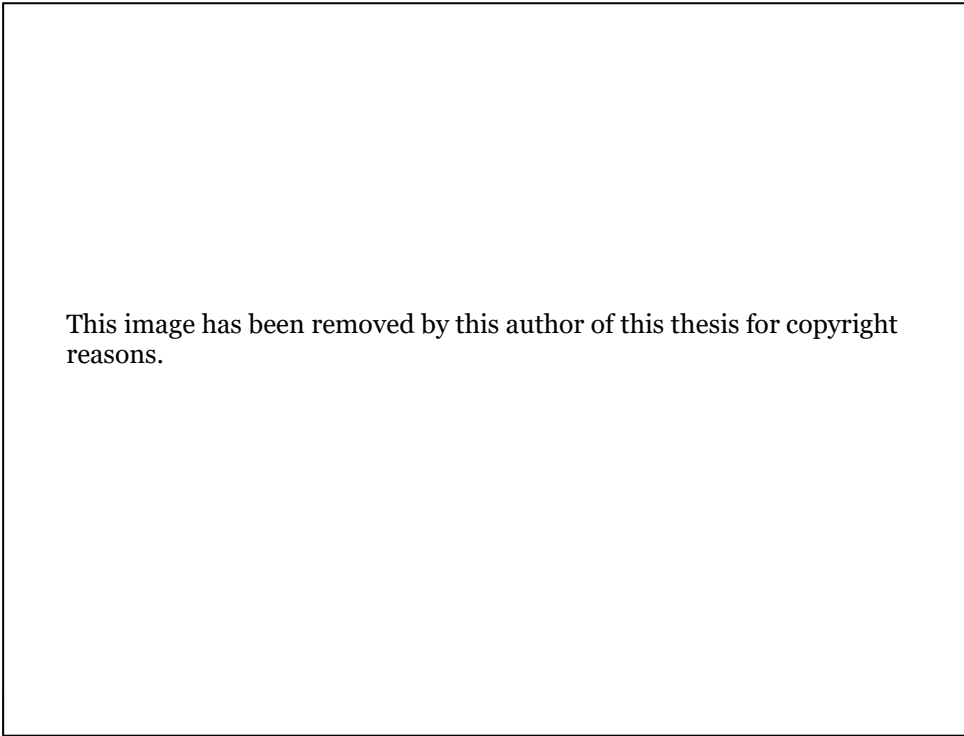


Fig. 22: Claudia Pharès, detail, *Strategy #3*, 2019.



Fig. 23: Claudia Pharès, detail, *Strategy #3*, 2019.

The arms stand perpendicular against the ceiling, like stalactites hanging from the roof of a cave. There are more arms on the gallery floor much like the corresponding cave formations stalagmites. These protruding sculptural arms are comparable to American artist Robert Gober's leg sculptures.<sup>57</sup> In Gober's *Untitled leg* (1989-1990) (Fig. 24) what appears to be a sculpture of a man's leg comes out from the wall and rests on the floor. The leg is visible from mid-calf and wears part of a pair of trousers, a sock and a shoe. The flesh of the ankle is revealed and has leg hair. The realism depicted in Gober's sculpture produces emotions that reflect the uncanny and perturbing.



This image has been removed by this author of this thesis for copyright reasons.

Fig. 24: Robert Gober, *Untitled leg*, 1989-1990.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Robert Gober, *Untitled leg*, 1989-1990, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist-gober-robert-artworks.htm>

<sup>58</sup> Robert Gober, *Untitled leg*, 1989-1990, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81067>

Unlike Gober's presentation of something familiar and grotesque, the arm sculptures in *Strategy #3* are of exposed bare arms. This aims to emphasize their gesture and the vulnerable maternal body. Their colour, shades of white and cream, is subdued and blends in with the gallery space. This proposition aims to show how a mother's contribution to society often exists unacknowledged and on the periphery.

Another artist who also casted body parts was the Polish artist Alina Szapocznikow.<sup>59</sup> From the 1960s–70s, she investigated ideas of desire and loss through her work where she cast parts of her own body. In *Leg* (1962) (Fig. 25), made from plaster, Szapocznikow's right leg appears bent and contracted. The interior of the leg is touching the ground and suggests that the artist was lying on her left side, possibly in a foetal or resting position. Similar to *Strategy #3*, it is not attached to the body. It appears as if amputated, speaking of loss, vulnerability, and fear.

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<sup>59</sup> Amy Chmielewski, "Alina Szapocznikow and Her Sculpture of Plastic Impermanence," *Woman's Art Journal* 32, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 39–47.

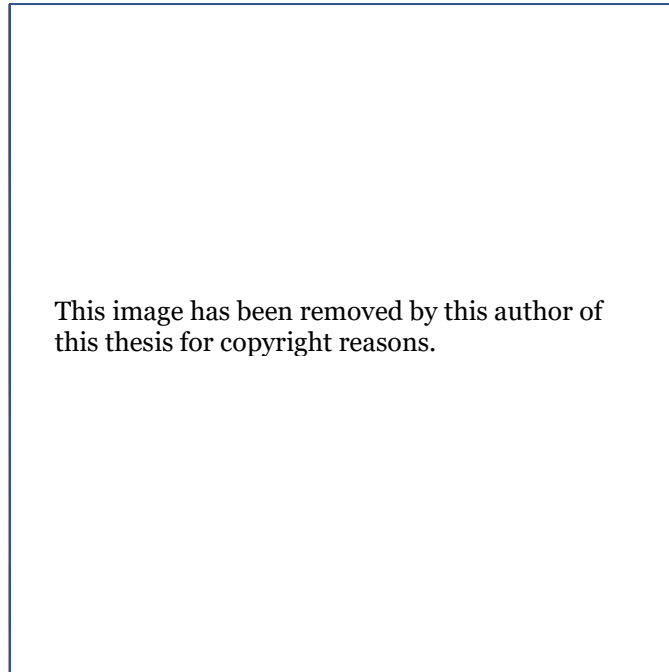


Fig. 25: Alina Szapocznikow, *Leg*, 1962.<sup>60</sup>

In Strategy #3, the concept of vulnerability is increased through the casting of numerous right arms. This aims to reflect a mother's awareness of her fallibility and her fear that her children will discover her weaknesses. The gesture seen in the bent wrist is as if it is pushing away. It is a strong and protective action. It aims to imply that the mother is not invincible.

The arms are made from wax. This is also a vulnerable material. It can register marks and can easily be reshaped or carved into. Akin to wax, the body is malleable and registers experiences with memory and scars. Wax was selected for the similar properties it shared with the human body.

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<sup>60</sup> Alina Szapocznikow, *Leg*, 1962, <https://hepworthwakefield.org/timeline/>.

The multiple right arms around the gallery space represent the multiplicity of tasks required in being a mother, as well as the labour associated with the fabrication of the artwork. This strategy echoes the repetition used in the works of Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Helen Grace.

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The labour associated with the casting of the arms was extensive. Multiple moulds and materials were trialled. Each one aimed to produce something fail-proof. Finally a three-part mould, with an outer plaster structure, was settled on. It enabled the possibility of making multiple replications. The first arm made out from this mould was 'discarded' for not looking 'perfect' enough. It had numerous air holes. This 'bad arm' was claimed by the artist's daughter, who saw it as having no major imperfection. This was an interesting observation given that the mother, the artist, was determined to achieve a perfect arm sculpture. The child had a different perspective. The artist mother's rejection of the imperfect arm could be seen as a reflection of feeling pressured to perform well, as the mother and as an artist.

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*“..., our body is being influenced by our life. And yet our body is more than the sum of its parts. We are after all more than the sum of our experiences. We are as malleable as wax. Descartes wrote about wax. We are sensitive to the souvenirs of what has happened before and apprehensive to what is going to happen after.”*

Louise Bourgeois<sup>61</sup>

As French-American artist Louise Bourgeois beautifully expressed it, the wax arms are able to embody malleability and connect to the idea that artist mothers are in a state of flux. Wanting to make these arms specific, the wax arms are all unique replicas of the artist’s right arm, including its individual imperfections. Despite wanting each one to be the same, each piece came out differently from the same mould. Their surfaces all bear blemishes that have been altered in an attempt to resemble as closely as possible the real arm. Accepting the minor imperfections in each arm, due to the nature of the casting process, is much like being a mother. If there was a mould for it, it would be impossible to match it. The mould actually restricted the ability to be authentic.

The mould represented the constructs that surround the way that mothers are meant to behave. The first moulds did not resist: they tore, they developed holes and even created deformed castings. These could be viewed as similar to examples of birth defects, or deformed limbs. This aligns with the thinking that if a mother is unable to fulfil unrealistic expectations, she too will break, or something will give.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid 27.

Despite this acknowledgement, numerous casts were rejected because they did not reflect perfection. This is the paradox in this practice: the refusal to conform to societal expectation became an obsession to create the perfect right arm. The impossibility of reaching an expected outcome was clearly delineated in the process. It involved numerous trips to the casting room in the workshop to unmould, remelt, repour and wait another full day. This called for the utmost of dedication, patience, and resilience. These are traits required of a mother. Mothering is not an innate skill: it is learnt through repetition, trial and error. American writer and science journalist Nathalie Angier has commented that the idea that mothers are better than fathers at caring for children is not based on gender. Mothers actually spend more time with the babies and interact for longer periods of time.<sup>62</sup> They require these periods to convalesce from childbirth and to breastfeed the baby. This gives ample time to understand and learn about the baby. Adding to this, Adrienne Rich believes that the fact we associate mothering with only women is because society has decided that since women have given birth, by default they should be the ones caring for the baby. The women are then indirectly assigned the task of caring and raising the children while at home. Assuming that mothers should be the primary carers for children is limiting and restricts the autonomy of women as mothers. It remains difficult to change the heteronormative culture that dominates Western society. Fathers taking paternity leave or choosing to be stay-at-home fathers is thought to still not be supported. If given the opportunity and encouragement, caring can be performed by anyone.

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<sup>62</sup> Nathalie Angier, *Woman: An Intimate Geography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999).

## STRATEGY #4: OUTDOOR LANDSCAPE INTERVENTION

In one corner of the room a screen displays a colour video work featuring the artist performing in an outdoor location on Toronto Island, Canada. This artwork contains a series of six clips (Fig. 27 to 32) where the artist walks with a wheelbarrow. Filled with a dozen sandbags she visits various sites where flooding has occurred. In the springtime, Toronto Island experiences floods as a result of global warming. Council sandbags of various sizes are in place in the landscape. In one film clip, the artist is seen positioning her own sandbags on top of the pre-existing sandbags at the locations. At times, the artist manages to control the ongoing flood with her sandbags. In another film clip, the artist is seen washing the council sandbags. The sound track playing in the background throughout the video becomes a record of the artist speaking about motherhood.

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The artist in the video work speaks about the advantages of being a single mother artist. It took inspiration from the Guerilla Girls' Manifesto, *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* (1988).

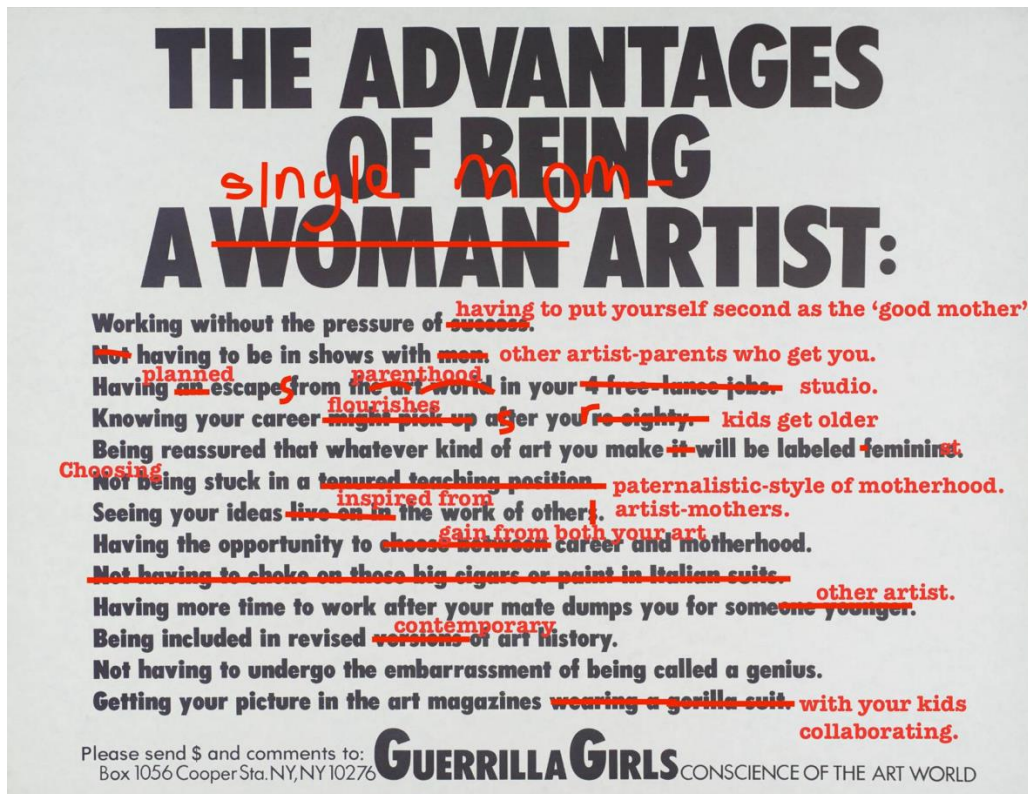


Fig. 26: Claudia Pharès, *Revisiting Guerilla Girls*, 2019

By altering an existing artwork, this work revisited the Guerilla Girls criticism of the status of female artists in the art world. The issues addressed when it was made in 1988 still exist today. Women artists are still underrepresented in the artworld despite the fact that more women graduate from art schools. This has been revealed by the *Countess* report on gender representation in the Australian contemporary artworld.<sup>63</sup>

If a woman artist chooses to become a mother her career is often put on hold, unless significant financial, emotional and logistical support is put in place

<sup>63</sup> “Countess Report,” accessed September 11, 2019, <http://thecountessreport.com.au>.

to maintain it. Even with these structures, an artist mother is often the primary carer of her children. This reality often involves having to factor in the work involved in mothering, at the expense of the art practice. It seems that it is impossible to not compromise between mothering and art making. Yet artist mothers persevere and this activity becomes their agency. Nevertheless there seems to have been a double-standard: artist mothers are often judged for indulging in creative pursuits, rather than dedicating their time to constructive childrearing. Being an artist has its own sets of misconceptions derived from the stereotypical characteristics associated with being a serious artist. Both childless artists Marina Abramović<sup>64</sup> and Tracey Emin<sup>65</sup> shared a common belief in that having children would have interfered with their creative endeavours and respective journeys to success. This belief reflects the view that male artists are not expected to forgo their art career when they become fathers as much as artist mothers. Being an artist and a mother has its challenges which may be compounded with gender roles and the division of labour in childrearing.

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<sup>64</sup> Nicole Puglise, “Marina Abramović”, The Guardian, published July 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jul/26/marina-abramovic-abortions-children-disaster-work>

<sup>65</sup> Ella Alexander, “Tracey Emin: 'There are good artists that have children. They are called men'”, The Independent Post, published October 3, 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/tracey-emin-there-are-good-artists-that-have-children-they-are-called-men-9771053.html>

In the video work, the artist is seen washing a row of readymade orange sandbags. The artist carries a bowl from one pile of bags to another soaking and cleaning as she goes. This task becomes symbolic of a mother's labour. It is a process that has to be repeated to maintain the cleanliness of the bags that are constantly exposed to the elements. In this video, the artist mother cares for the environment.

In the last half of the twentieth century in North America, environmental activism seems to have been one of the responsibilities assumed by mother-centred activists.<sup>66</sup> In line with promoting the caring and nurturing of their children as a social responsibility, mothers advocated for clean air and toxic-free environments along with other social causes for the betterment of society. Mothers extended their caring for their children beyond the private/domestic sphere. It enables rallying other voices to advocate for environmental issues which affect everyone. In Strategy #4, the artist mother extends her caring responsibility beyond the private, domestic, interior context to the outdoors. The surroundings become a new space for the performing mother to interact with the council sandbags. Once her own sandbags are put in place, the work of the mother appears as traces of her labour and her caring. Squeezed into spaces or stacked onto the ones that already exist, the "MOTHER" sandbags engage with the landscape. They become a metaphor for the versatile artist mother when managing her life as a mother and as an artist.

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66 Susan Logsdon-Conradsen, "From Materialism to Activist Mothering: The Evolution of Mother Activism in the United States Environmental Movement", *The Journal of Motherhood Initiative*, vol.2:1, 2011, 1.

As an intervention into the landscape, this work highlights the important role some activist mothers have in raising awareness about social and environmental issues. In their activism, mothers not only advocate for their own visibility but also for the causes that are often neglected as a consequence of capitalism.



Fig. 27: Claudia Pharès, Detail *Strategy #4*, 2019.



Fig. 28: Claudia Pharès, *Detail Strategy #4*, 2019.



Fig. 29: Claudia Pharès, *Detail Strategy #4*, 2019.



Fig. 30: Claudia Pharès, *Detail Strategy #4*, 2019.



Fig. 31: Claudia Pharès, *Detail Strategy #4*, 2019.



Fig. 32: Claudia Pharès, *Detail Strategy #4*, 2019.

## IN CLOSING

*Strategies: An Artist Mother's Maintenance Manifesto* explores the idea of mothering as a form of labour in conjunction with the work entailed in maintaining an art practice. Personal experience as an artist mother has been source material for this investigation. The idea of the 'good mother' is thought to be a projection stemming from patriarchal ideologies. This point of view attaches mothers to an all-encompassing and all-giving notion of care, regardless of their needs and interests. To counteract these limiting beliefs, mother-centred feminism has been advocated to validate mothering as a discipline. Matricentric feminism has been used as a framework for this research. The purpose of this research was to enable tactics that demonstrate how a mothering practice and an art practice can inform one another. There was no hierarchy in the resultant work.

The proposed strategies were developed using the principle of trans/performance which informed manifestations of the day-to-day activities undertaken by an artist mother. The private sphere associated with mothering has been made more porous when it has been exposed to a public space. The strategies tested include a framed mounted photograph, an installation of sandbags, a series of arm sculptures and a video installation. The process used for each strategy was complemented by the works of other artist mothers who also address the notion of motherhood, invisible labour, and performance. The theoretical research behind the project enabled a new way of thinking regarding mothering. Matricentric feminism offered a successful framework to

position oneself in as an “outlaw from the institution of motherhood” or a “revolutionary mother”. That is, a feminist mother who strives to implement a feminist ideology with her partner, her children, and the work she is involved in.

The four strategies outlined were attempts at readdressing the self, as a mother and artist who has agency and autonomy. There is still a lot of unfinished business surrounding feminism, and even more with motherhood’s role within this. *Strategies: An Artist Mother’s Maintenance Manifesto* is a proposition aimed at creating change in the discourse surrounding art and motherhood.

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## APPENDIX









