

Performance and the Maternal
Emily Underwood-Lee and Lena Šimić

We created our ‘Performance and the Maternal’ research project in order to investigate the intersections between performance studies and maternal studies. To date we have organised and hosted three research gatherings at the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, Edge Hill University and the University of South Wales. The research gatherings connected 36 scholars and artists and welcomed babies and children.

The ‘Performance and the Maternal’ project is conceived as both collaborative and pragmatic, enabling us to bring together our research interests derived from our scholarly work and independent performance practices and our everyday lived experience. In this article we explore how to write with and in response to one another, across geographical and temporal spaces and enable the gaps to become generative rather than problematic. The format is designed to enable living and representing our maternal experiences. How to write and think together, and yet apart? How to stay focused? How to find time for research, demanding (yet loving) children and insistencies of family life?

The correspondences that have made it into this final publication have been edited, re-written and written over in order to bring together our thoughts on performance and the maternal after our three initial research gatherings. A version of these letters was presented as a paper at the ‘Museum of Motherhood’ conference at Manhattan College in May 2016.

Dear Lena

I do not know where to begin. Motherhood is too big. We are all carriers and all carried.¹ We carry our mothers, our children and our memories within us. We are all “of woman born”.² So I do not know where to begin.

I do not know where to begin. We are all the performers of our everyday lives, we assert our maternal identity or have maternal identities forced upon us. It is in everything we do. So I do not know where to begin.

I do not know where to begin but perhaps I should try at the beginning. Which beginning? A birth is a beginning. The birth of a child, the birth of a mother, the birth of an idea, the birth of a discipline, the birth of a project. So when was this project birthed? Is at the three meetings in Liverpool and Cardiff? Is it when you and I realised that performance studies as a discipline was under-represented in maternal studies? Was it 10 years ago when we realised we wanted to collaborate? Perhaps it was when you began performing *Medea Mothers’ Clothes* (2004) or I began performing *Patience* (2008)? Or was it when we birthed our own children and the shock of motherhood made us return to our academic and artistic practices with a new focus? Perhaps it was our own births? So I do not know where to begin.

¹ See the work of Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006) as well as her newly developed concept around ‘carriance’ as noted at Subrealism, event series on the work of Bracha Ettinger, Maynooth University 2014 and in her essay ‘Carriance, Copoiesis and the Subreal’ for the 14th Istanbul Biennial catalogue ‘Saltwater’ (2015).

² Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and as Institution* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1976).

Phyllis Chesler positions motherhood as a series of questions.³ Am I ‘without the history of female askings. [Do I] ... ask as if for the first time’.⁴ In our meeting Lisa Baraitser noticed that there is always a point in the discussions where women start telling their birth stories. We are all asking as if for the first time. And yet there is so much, the discipline of maternal studies is rich. Performance artists have been sharing experiences of motherhood for generations (cf. Mierle Laaderman Ukeles, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969), Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* (1973-1979), *Mother Art Collective* (1973 – 1986), *The Magdalena Project* (since 1986).

So I do not know where to begin, should we open it up or narrow it down... what is your ‘maternal’, what is your ‘performance’?

With love

Emily

Emily,

I am repeating myself, again and again: a mother to four boys, trying to get it right with each new child. I perform motherhood, through the messiness of the daily. I then reflect as well as *enact* motherhood again through artworks. It doesn’t feel right. I fail again. It is impossible. I try to be Donald Winnicott’s *good-enough mother* rather than the clinging overbearing creature I often am.⁵ I struggle through art and mothering with ambivalence. I fail again. I remind myself to understand my artwork in process, never finished, never done. A mother’s work is never done. Mother/artist lives and works through the acceptance of the incomplete.

And here we are, beginning something new again, something which began years ago... We are repeating. We are not alone. In this project we are in the company of Adele Senior, Billie Hunter, Chloé Déchery, Clare Qualmann, Deej Fabyc, Elaine Aston, Elena Marchevska, Emily Orley, Eve Dent, Grace Surman, Helen Sargeant, Helena Walsh, Ildiko Rippel, Jennifer Verson, Jodie Hawkes, Jozefina Komporaly, Katja Hilevaara, Lib Taylor, Lisa Baraitser, Lizzie Philips, Márta Minier, Mary Paterson, Myfanwyn Ryan, Oriana Fox, Paula McCloskey, Pete Phillips, Prue Thimbleby, Roberta Mock, Rosie Garton, Rosie Reed-Hillman, Sarah Black, Siobhan Mckeown, Tracy Evans, and Zoë Gingell.

I am still amazed at the level we all struggle and juggle and create and thrive and suffer. Each one of us has her own fight. We are together and alone at the same time. Lisa Baraitser talked of ‘maternal commons’, an idea, proposed by Imogen Tyler, which insists on reconfiguring the things we share as a political act. At times ‘maternal commons’ are much better imagined than realised. However, with this project *Performance and the Maternal*, I feel we are getting towards that idea, of being together but at the same time, able to hold onto our differences, fights and complexities.

In solidarity

³ Phyllis Chesler, *With Child: A Diary of Motherhood* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 2nd edition 1998).

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁵ David Winnicott, ‘Transitional objects and transitional phenomena’, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34:89-97, 1953.

Lena

Dear Lena

In our research gatherings we have listened to women describing the shock of motherhood, the spilled blood, the censored images of crowning, the oppressive presence of the larger than life mother, the battle for control of our reproductive rights, the mother as the carrier of national identity, the labour of caring, the abject, the heart-wrenching love, the terror of the lost child, the fear of the unknown child, the shadows that appear in the dark hours, and much more besides. Maybe this anger and extreme emotion is part of our maternal commons. Maybe it is in this place that we all find a means of asserting our differences and resisting our perceived identities.

At our meetings performers, artists, academics, midwives, arts facilitators, and others united by a concern with the maternal, discuss what we share and how the maternal is *represented* in performance. What happens in the live encounter? Jill Dolan argues that a temporary community is established when audiences and performers meet. This fleeting theatrical connection enables a collective imagining together, or “utopian performative”, where we can explore alternative ways of being in the world.⁶ Maybe the sharing together and combined dreaming enabled in the performance space can push us towards another more political way of considering the maternal. Jack Zipes discusses Bloch’s thoughts on hope being thwarted, as soon as a conclusion or static point is reached the utopian may begin to stagnate; it is at the point of achieving a utopian vision and making concrete that hope might be disappointed.⁷ In performance the maternal is always there to be imagined, never pinned down, always fleeting, and always full of possibility.

Yours in hope

Emily

Emily

I’m reading *The Second Sex* and de Beauvoir is longing for women to be capable of both immanence and transcendence. She sees transcendence as something which women have been deprived of, as action and creativity, which is external and public. Her reading of the mother position is somewhat reductive: woman’s reproductive role is over-emphasized in order to be critiqued. Of course, I am a constant defender of the maternal. And I am also keen to rely on (de Beauvoir’s) immanence: the everyday drudgery of our lived existence, repetitiveness and boredom. A ‘maternal commons’ can help here, as we feel isolated and connected in our everydayness and struggles.

I am keen to understand representation (in performance and live art) as the lived anew, as action, as here/now, again. We are always already beyond representation. Maternal

⁶ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (University of Michigan Press, 2005).

⁷ Jack Zipes, ‘Toward a Realisation of Anticipatory Illumination’ in Ernst Bloch *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* trans by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenberg (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989) p. xxv.

representation itself is real and immanent. When I watch Grace Surman's video entitled *I Love My Baby and My Baby Loves...* (2010), in which she engages in play with her baby, she is at the same time being an artist, having agency over her representation, as well as actually playing with her baby. There's pleasure in performance making. This is it, there's nothing more. Laura Cull writes: 'Representation is real creation, not a second-order made of being, forever detached from and inadequate to some "thing" that is represented'.⁸

We are being and acting at the same time, not detached, not divorced from our immediate reality and context. I am always called into this reality, as a mother and as an artist. I cannot transcend it. It is fine here. It is okay. We are in the process of an encounter, with a child, with an artwork, with audiences, with one another. Immediate and immanent. Maternal art calls for thinking/feeling action.

'I am. We are.

That is enough. Now we have to begin.'

Opening lines of Ernst Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia* (1918)

When I turn my thinking to utopia, I wonder what kind of concrete is disallowed in order for utopia to be grasped? The maternal throws us into the concrete; the imperfect concrete we are living in, with cracks and scars and breaks and holes, in the material world of mothering and making. Maternal performance engages with and takes care of the now, the immediate, of each other, for each other. The world itself is not fully transformed, but there's a certain dose of concreteness in the actual act.

Here I would like to name check Lea Lublin's *Mon Fils* performance-exhibition in Paris in 1968 where she took her son to the museums and exhibited 'care' for him, fed him, changed him, put him to sleep. Representation and reality collapsed into one another. In connection to this 'real labour' and immediacy of action I'd also like to name check a few contemporary performance makers: Elena Marchevska, Helen Sargeant, Jessica Olah, Lenka Clayton, Lizzie Philips, Natalie Loveless. In maternal performance, life and art collapse into one, action is moved beyond representation, or even in spite of it.

With a sense of real anticipation,

Lena

Lena,

I do not know how to end. The project continues to open out.

I think we can say that performance enables the beginning of a maternal commons, of a transcendence and immanence, of a space of imagination where we are free to think about and question what it means to be a mother both in life and art and at the point where these co-exist. This is important but incomplete. We start without knowing, without seeing a way through, but we start and to start is always hopeful. But at the end of these three gatherings I am left with questions. Whose maternal is it that is represented? Whose commonality is reached? And what changes when the maternal is represented in live encounter? The labour

⁸ Laura Cull, *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) p.5.

and everyday experience of so many is made visible while others are hidden. Certain privileges are assumed. We are the political mothers, the mothers who care, the mothers who can articulate, the mothers who work hard, the mothers who are heard, and read.

Emily

Lena Šimić is a mother of four boys, a performance practitioner, pedagogue and scholar. Senior Lecturer in Drama at Edge Hill University. A co-organizer of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, an art activist initiative in her family home in Liverpool, UK. Lena has published five artist books *Maternal Matters and Other Sisters* (2009), *Blood & Soil: we were always meant to meet...* (2011, with Verson), *Five 2008 – 2012* (2014), *The Mums and Babies Ensemble* (2015, with Radosavljević and Rigby) and *4 Boys [for Beuys]* (2016). She has presented her arts practice and research in a variety of academic journals (Performance Research, Contemporary Theatre Review, n.paradoxa, RiDE, Feminist Review, Studies in the Maternal) and in various arts venues and festivals in the UK and abroad.

Emily Underwood-Lee is a failing feminist mother to two daughters. She is also a performance practitioner and Research Fellow at the George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling at the University of South Wales. Emily creates autobiographical work and is principally concerned with the construction of gender and how the body can be presented and represented in performance. Her research focuses on autobiographical stories and the body in a variety of contexts including feminist performance art, narratives of illness, performance and the maternal, and performance and disability. Emily's solo projects include *Titillation* (2014), *Titillation Grade 3* (2011), *Patience* (2009), and *Ode to Morten Harket* (2007).