

**REPRESENTING THE MOTHER:  
FEMINIST ART AND THE MATERNAL**

by

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## VITA

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Additionally, as part of her studies, Armstrong completed an internship in the archives department at Artpace in San Antonio.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Judy Chicago, <i>Birth Tear/Tear</i> , 1982	37
2. Judy Chicago, <i>The Dinner Party</i> , 1975-79	38
3. Hannah Wilke, <i>S.O.S. Starification Object Series</i> , 1974-82	39
4. Hannah Wilke, <i>Intra-Venus</i> , 1992-93	40
5. Mary Kelly, <i>Post-Partum Document</i> , 1973	41
6. Mary Kelly, <i>Post-Partum Document</i> , 1978	42
7. Catherine Opie, <i>Self-Portrait/Cutting</i> , 1993	43
8. Catherine Opie, <i>Self-Portrait/Pervert</i> , 1994	44
9. Catherine Opie, <i>Self-Portrait/Nursing</i> , 2004	45
10. Renée Cox, <i>Yo Mama</i> , 1993	46
11. Renée Cox, <i>Yo Mama, the Statue</i> , 1993	47
12. Janine Antoni, <i>Loving Care</i> , 1993	48
13. Janine Antoni, <i>Wean</i> , 1990	49
14. Janine Antoni, <i>Inhabit</i> , 2009	50
15. Janine Antoni, <i>One another</i> , 2008	51

## **REPRESENTING THE MOTHER: FEMINIST ART AND THE MATERNAL**

### **Introduction**

With the inception of the second wave of the women's movement in the 1960s, motherhood and feminism formed a strained alliance. The goal of the women's movement, to create economic, political and sexual equality for the sexes, resulted in women rejecting the "traditional" female roles of wife and mother that had been part of a patriarchal social structure. "In both tone, and content, some early feminists texts rejected motherhood, characterizing it as part of the rubric of a traditional domesticity that bolstered ideological conformity and squelched individual, creative and sexual expressiveness," according to Laura Umansky.<sup>1</sup> Feminism in the early 1970s rigorously questioned the institution of motherhood. Feminist Ann Snitow claimed, "This radical questioning was misread as an attack on housewives. . . . By the late seventies, both the mothers and the non-mothers were on the defensive."<sup>2</sup> A false either/or premise prohibited a woman from being both a feminist and a "good" mother. Terry Arendell observed, "The prevailing ideology in North America is that of *intensive mothering*. This motherhood mandate declares that mothering is exclusive, wholly child centered, emotionally involving, and time-consuming. The mother portrayed in this ideology is devoted to the care of others; she is self-sacrificing and 'not a subject with her own needs and interests.' She is the good mother."<sup>3</sup> Procreation, in and of itself, was not the problem for feminists; rather it was the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which

defined women exclusively in terms of their reproductive function. The Women's Movement caused women to think more critically about motherhood.

Some observers have asserted that the feminist critique of motherhood dissuaded many women's liberationists from bearing children. In the American population as a whole, but most particularly in the educated white middle class into which most women's liberationists fit, birth rates dropped during the early to mid-1970s. The overall American birth rate slid from 23.7 births per thousand women in 1960 to 18.4 in 1970, and then continued to decline to 14.8 in 1975. Demographers attribute this dip to the wide availability of birth control and abortion and to the widened options, especially higher education, available to women. Yet most middle-class women of this era simply postponed maternity—as they entered their thirties and completed their education, the birth rate increased. In the mid-1970s an explosion of feminist writing on motherhood occurred.<sup>4</sup> While feminists and mothers have often been positioned in opposition to one another, “arguments against this culture's anti-mother bias were first made by radical feminists, who pointed out the hypocrisy of a society that sentimentalizes motherhood while devaluing the work mothers do.”<sup>5</sup> Feminists agitated for an acknowledgement of the labor of mother work as well as for an identity beyond “mother.”

Feminist politics permeated the art world, and in the 1970s the feminist art movement emerged as a highly visible faction of the Women's Movement. Early on, a majority of members sought to locate and express the uniquely female experience in their art in order to unify women and destabilize the patriarchy. “Early feminist art theory and practice often took their impetus from the desire to challenge misogynistic representations of women as sexual objects in Western art and popular culture, stressing



the importance of providing alternative, positive images of women to counter this objectification.”<sup>6</sup> This desire was manifest in female body imagery or “central core” imagery as well as in explorations of female sexuality and female experience generally. Soon after its original articulation, the idea that female sensibility was biologically determined (known as essentialism) was challenged by critics who argued that femininity was a social construct. For example, critic Lisa Tickner claimed that women’s identities (including their sexuality) had been molded by a patriarchal culture, which denied women the “language with which to express their sexuality” having only the male one as a point of reference.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, “In the late 1970s and 1980s, the majority of feminist artists rejected the celebration of positive images of women in favor of the explicit critique of the objectifying ‘male gaze’.”<sup>8</sup> Believing that representation promoted gender inequality in our society, they perceived “representation not as mimesis of some ultimate reality, but rather as a way of reflecting the culture’s dominant ideology, and therefore inevitably politically motivated.”<sup>9</sup> These critics ignored the possibility of a female subject position. Critic Lucy Lippard countered, “When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their *selves*; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from objects to subjects.”<sup>10</sup>

The essentialists dealt with female experiences, but generally avoided the topic of motherhood. In her book *Feminist Art and the Maternal* Andrea Liss observed, “The mother, however, remained a silent outcast for many feminists who strategically needed to distance themselves from all that was coded as passive, weak, and irrational, sometimes repudiating their own mothers in the process.”<sup>11</sup> A select few feminist artists have addressed the topic of motherhood. Spanning two generations, these women have

employed different strategies in their work in an effort to target “cultural ideologies that continue to make the coalition of feminism and motherhood a taboo.”<sup>12</sup> A few second-wave feminist artists, e.g., Mary Kelly, addressed motherhood, but in a language vetted by the patriarchy. Generally textual, this approach prohibited any representation of the mother-body. Contemporary artists Catherine Opie, Renée Cox, and Janine Antoni represent the mother in their art. As self-proclaimed feminists, they produce works that function as signs of protest, another step in reclaiming the subjectivity and visibility denied to women and mothers. The concept of subjectivity is integral to the work of all of these artists and refers to the taking up of a subject position or authorial identity. The historic denial of a female subject position is connected to Sigmund Freud’s theorization of woman as a site of lack. The loss of maternal subjectivity and the degraded status of the mother are intimately connected to Freud’s theorization of the mother.

### **The Impact of Freud on the Mother**

The impact of Freud on the institution of motherhood cannot be overstated. E. Ann Kaplan observes, “Even though Freud does not directly address the mother, nor say much about female sexuality per se, his theories revolutionized nineteenth-century motherhood discourses as Rousseau’s theories had revolutionized pre-modern motherhood discourses.”<sup>13</sup> Freud exclusively defined the mother in terms of the child. He introduced the idea of subjectivity (although this was Jacques Lacan’s term) in his theorization of how the baby develops awareness of itself as a separate being from its mother. She reappears in his allusion to the difference between the child’s level of *fusion* with her in the pre-Oedipal stage, and the post-Oedipal level of selfhood (achieved through the experience of the Oedipus Complex, in which castration is accepted by the

female child, and feared by the male child). Although he did not develop the theory, he hypothesized that both male and female children learn to use language as the means to replace the loss of the mother, who recedes into the unconscious at latency.<sup>14</sup> Parveen Adams concluded that, “Freud’s concept of psychical reality requires the repression of the desire for the mother, an instinctual renunciation which is the price of civilization.”<sup>15</sup> If the child is to succeed in attaining selfhood, it must transcend Freud’s “Primal” mother (the pre-Oedipal mother). In this scenario, the child is pitted against the mother; Freud had difficulty in “defining her other than as object of hatred or place of pathology.”<sup>16</sup> In her examination of Freud’s theorization of the mother/child relationship, Kaplan observed,

First, it is important to note that, having once “discovered” the pre-Oedipal mother, psychoanalytic theory proceeds to belittle her and to represent her only through phallic constructs. Freud, and many object-relations theorists, could think of the child’s meaning to the mother only in terms of the phallus, just as they could think of the mother’s meaning to the child only in such terms; that is, theories of the meaning of the child to the mother are derived from Freud’s prior theories of how the *child* thinks the mother.<sup>17</sup>

Freud denied that in the early development of the child’s personality the child made any significant attachments. Instead of seeking to bond to the mother the infant, as theorized by Freud, desires only to satisfy inner instinctual drives. “The mother is seen only as a distant *object*, used to gratify the child’s needs. . . . The role of the mother, as a person actively influencing and affecting the infant of either gender, was ignored by Freud. . . . Freud’s theory gives the illusion that the infant is narcissistically self-sufficient and denies its deeply dependent relationship to the mother.”<sup>18</sup>

Female analysts, e.g., Melanie Klein, disagreed with Freud’s dismissal of the mother’s role in early childhood development. While Freud emphasized the father’s role

in the development of the child's personality, Klein claimed that it was the mother-child relationship in the first three years of life (the pre-Oedipal period) that most influenced personality development.<sup>19</sup> Concomitantly, problems in this phase of development resulted in more psychopathology than those experienced in the Oedipal phase, which emphasized the father. A radical departure from Freud, Klein's theory of child development was "less biological and more relational."<sup>20</sup> As such, she believed that "the relationship of the infant's bonding to the mother and later separating from her is the central issue in infant development. . . . The infant was relating to and internalizing the mother from birth onward."<sup>21</sup>

Psychoanalysis strips mothers of their subjectivity by portraying them solely as objects of their children's developmental needs. For Jacques Lacan, subjectivity is *a priori* male, as the female is defined in terms of lack—the lack of the phallus. As such, she is without authorial identity. The mother, as theorized by Freud and Lacan, is without agency or subjectivity—she is a means to an end. Film theorist Laura Mulvey argues "the function of woman in forming the patriarchal conscious is twofold, she first symbolizes the castration threat by her real absence of a penis and second thereby raises her child into the Symbolic. Once this has been achieved, her meaning in the process is at an end, it does not last into the world of law and language except as a memory which oscillates between memory of maternal plenitude and memory of lack."<sup>22</sup> A woman is considered deviant if she claims her subjectivity and fails to "serve patriarchal unconscious needs."<sup>23</sup>

This issue of unsettling the patriarchy and claiming female subjectivity was paramount in the feminist art movement.

## **Feminist Art Movement**

Feminism in the arts grew out of the contemporary women's movement of the 1960s. From the beginning, the emphases of artists on the East and West Coasts differed. Through a Marxist critique of institutionalized sexism, New York artists sought economic parity and equal representation in exhibitions, whereas their West Coast counterparts were more concerned with exploring issues of aesthetics and female consciousness. In a 1978 interview artist Eleanor Antin commented on the different feminisms of the two coasts:

In New York people who are interested in politics have a standard Marxist line, a kind of system they place upon the world without any relation to its fit with experience reality. New York feminism is more contaminated with Marxist bullshit. In California, feminism has been more a social, political and psychological thing about what it means to be a woman in this society, a particular woman, an artist.<sup>24</sup>

On both coasts, feminist art historians focused on the work of women artists historically overlooked and excluded from the canon. Linda Nochlin's seminal essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971), tackled the question of the historical absence of a female talent to rival that of Leonardo or Michelangelo. She rejected the notion that women are incapable of greatness, and instead attributed the lack of women artists in this category to their exclusion from educational opportunities. She also questioned the ideology underlying the discipline of art history (and other academic disciplines), citing the biased viewpoint of the white, Western, male academician. She insisted this must be righted if we are "to achieve a more adequate and accurate view of historical situations."<sup>25</sup>

The feminist art movement was one of the most ambitious, influential, and enduring artistic movements to emerge in the late twentieth century; feminist art pushed

back against the art-for-art's-sake attitude of modernist abstraction. Ideological in nature, it advocated for work that dealt with critical issues in the world and topics that artists have been exploring ever since: bodies, class, race, gender, consumerism, the art market, colonialism, and political and cultural power. Since the feminist art movement, the message has mattered as much as the medium. New York Times art critic Holland Cotter said, "The best American artists of the last 30 years are as interesting as they are in part because of the feminist art movement of the early 1970s. It changed everything."<sup>26</sup> Its impact cannot be overstated. Without it, identity-based art, crafts-derived art, performance art, and much political art would not exist in the form it does, if at all. Much of what we call postmodern art has feminism at its source.

### **Judy Chicago and the Feminist Art Program**

The emergence of a consciously feminist art practice in the United States was, arguably, due to the developments on the West Coast and to Judy Chicago's feminist pedagogy, beginning with the first feminist art course at Fresno State College in 1970. The following year, she and Miriam Schapiro created the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. The program was restricted to women and students were encouraged to let their experiences as women inform their work.<sup>27</sup>

The Feminist Art Program was created in response to Chicago's own experience in graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), particularly the lack of support she received from her male classmates and professors. Her biomorphic imagery, which obliquely referenced female anatomy, was received with hostility by her thesis committee; they threatened to withdraw their support if she continued to make work in this vein. She abandoned the work explaining, "I had begun to compensate for

my situation as a woman by trying to continually prove that I was as tough as a man, and I had begun to change my work so that it would be accepted by men.”<sup>28</sup> Describing the sexism of the art world in 1960s and 1970s she observes, “I learned that if I wanted my work to be taken seriously, the work should not reveal its having been made by a woman. One of the best compliments a woman artist could receive then was that ‘her work looked like it was made by a man’.”<sup>29</sup>

One of the goals of the feminist art movement was to breakdown women’s isolation from one another through consciousness-raising techniques, such as story-telling. Shared personal experiences increased the awareness of the individual, and of the group as a whole. Chicago and Schapiro encouraged collaborative working methods. In January 1972, women from the Feminist Art Program opened a site-specific installation in an old house in a residential neighborhood of Hollywood called *Womanhouse*. The series of installations included Chicago’s *Menstruation Bathroom*, Kathy Huberland’s *Bridal Staircase*, Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brody’s *Dollhouse*, Faith Wilding’s *Womb Room* and other installations and performances that dealt frankly with female subject matter. According to Amelia Jones, “By making the personal experiences of women—menstruation, childbearing, maternity, aging, eroticism, domesticity, violence, objectification—political feminists challenged the age-old erasure of women’s participation in Western culture.”<sup>30</sup>

Around this time, Chicago begins using open forms in her work that related to what she identified as “a central core, my vagina, that which made me a woman. I was interested in a dissolving sensation, like one experiences during orgasm.”<sup>31</sup> Chicago’s work was driven by her commitment to essentialism, a theory that stressed and celebrated

women's difference from men, which is based, in no small part, on biological difference. A series of large acrylic on clear Plexiglas spray paintings of seemingly vibrating octagonal forms, the *Pasadena Lifesavers* (1969-70) were "the first of what Chicago would later characterize as her 'central core' images, referring to circular vaginal or womb shapes as a political symbol of female 'consciousness.'"<sup>32</sup> Whitney Chadwick observed, "The self-conscious investigation of female subjectivity through images of the body was one aspect of the desire to celebrate female knowledge and experience."<sup>33</sup> In 1973, Chicago and Schapiro co-authored an article in *Womanspace Journal* in which they asked, "What does it feel like to be a woman? To be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from which life emerges?"<sup>34</sup> While the use of female imagery was widespread in the 1970s, the validity of an "essential femaleness" was widely contested by other artists and critics.

Although Chicago never had children, she was interested in the process of childbirth. *The Birth Project* (1980-85, fig. 1) was modeled on her epic installation, *The Dinner Party* (1975-79, fig.2). A controversial attempt to educate society about the rich heritage of women, *The Dinner Party* consisted of a triangular banquet table, forty-eight feet in length, with thirty-nine place settings each commemorating a historical woman. The tableau employed "women's work" or "craft", including ceramics, textiles, and porcelain, and celebrated central core imagery. By linking craft and art in her mixed media work, Chicago challenged "high" art and its traditional standards of excellence. *The Dinner Party* was dismissed by critic Hilton Kramer as being "very bad art, . . . art so mired in the pieties of a political cause that it quite fails to acquire any independent



artistic life of its own.”<sup>35</sup> Upon *The Dinner Party*’s completion, Chicago began to research birth imagery:

I wanted to use the birth process as a metaphor for the creation of life. Much to my surprise, I found there were few paintings or sculptures in the history of Western art – and until quite recently no pictures at all – of the actual moment of birth. Despite the fact that birth is so obviously a universal experience and central to most women’s lives, it has rarely been depicted or described. This forces every woman to experience privately and often abjectly what could be a triumphant confrontation with the life process itself. The *Birth Project* grew out of my recognition of what this lack of images means: i.e., that which is not imaged exists outside of what is considered part of the ‘universal’ human experience.<sup>36</sup>

Chicago endeavored to visually articulate the female subject position in her work.

### **Essentialism**

For a brief period in the 1970s, femininity and gender difference were emphasized by essentialist artists. Jones observes, “Early feminist art theory and practice often took their impetus from the desire to challenge misogynist representations of women as sexual objects in Western art and popular culture, stressing the importance of providing alternative, positive images of women to counter this objectification.”<sup>37</sup> For many women, authenticity of artistic expression and the experience of being female were inextricably bound together. A belief in essentialism, or a true biological femaleness, most convincingly theorized by Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, and Susan Griffin, motivated much art by American women during the 1970s. Primarily ahistorical and outside of race or class analysis, essentialism offered fixed ideas about the “nature” of women. These ideas were often reduced to a set of characteristics or a language of form—layered, tactile, “central core,” etc. – and used to validate empirical data rooted in women’s experiences of life under patriarchy.<sup>38</sup>

Pioneering artists such as Gina Pane, Hannah Wilke, Lynda Benglis, Carolee Schneemann, Mary Beth Edelson, Barbara Smith, Terry Wolverton, and Ana Mendieta, who inserted their bodies into their art in order to bridge the traditional distance that ostensibly exists between the (male) creator of art and the (female) object, were dismissed in the eighties for being insufficiently critical of the manner in which their bodies were embedded within Western representational ideology.<sup>39</sup> The debate was concisely summarized by Chadwick:

From the beginning, many feminists reacted strongly to the idea of womb-centered imagery as just another reworking of biological determinism and a restrictive attempt to redefine femaleness. The notion of an unchanging female “essence” remained to be tested against theories of representation, which argue that the meaning of visual images is culturally and historically specific and unstable; that is, with no fixed “truth” that can be uncovered. Yet central core imagery remained an important part of an attempt to celebrate sexual difference and express pride in the female body and spirit.<sup>40</sup>

Motherhood was not part of this celebration. In her 1976 book on feminist art, *From the Center*, Lucy Lippard notes “No women dealing with their own bodies and biographies have introduced pregnancy or childbirth as a major image. . . . The process of the destruction of derogatory myths surrounding female experience and physiology appears to be one of the major motives for the recent surge in body art by feminist artists. Perhaps procreativity is the next tabu to be tackled, one that might make clearer the elusive factors that divide body art by women from that by men.”<sup>41</sup> As we will see, essentialism was soon replaced by the deconstructivist critique. Jones wrote, “In the late 1970s and 1980s the majority of feminist artists rejected the celebration of positive images of women in favor of the explicit critique of the objectifying ‘male gaze.’”<sup>42</sup> This debate intensified the increasing polarization of feminist artists.

### **Hannah Wilke**

Hannah Wilke was “among the first group of women to enact their feminism on their own bodies in ways that linked their practice to the body art of male artists.”<sup>43</sup> Her use of her nude body coupled with her good looks led to conflicting readings of her work. She was often accused of being complicit with the patriarchy she was trying to critique. Lippard concluded that “A woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men’s use of women for sexual titillation and from women’s use of women to expose that insult.”<sup>44</sup> Wilke faced strong criticism from feminists who accused her of ignoring of the problematic nature of representation of women in our culture; however, Jones argues that Wilke was “one the first feminist artists to address explicitly the relationship of the (male) viewer to the (female) object of his gaze. Furthermore, her sophisticated insertions of text complicate the readings of her often sexually loaded images. The notion, widespread during the 1980s, that most American feminist art of the 1970s naively celebrated an (essential) femaleness and dispensed with any theory of the representation of women is simplistic and does a disservice to the artists of that decade.”<sup>45</sup> By assuming the subject position in the work, these artists avoid the objectification inherent in male artists’ representation of women.

Wilke’s S.O.S. Starification Object Series (1974-82, fig. 3) was intended to be a dual commentary on the physical scarification women undergo in some cultures and the disposability of women in American culture. When Wilke presented S.O.S. to the public, she distributed chewing gum to audience members while she removed her clothes. After audience members chewed the gum, she would ask for it back, twisting each piece into a vaginal form that she then adhered to her naked body. Wilke explains her choice of

medium by saying, “I chose gum because it’s the perfect metaphor for the American woman—chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece.”<sup>46</sup> Jones argues that these vaginal forms “are not celebratory, as the label of ‘essentialism’ would imply; rather, as marks of suffering they suggest that gender—in particular femininity—is culturally marked as a condition of woundedness.”<sup>47</sup> The critical nature of Wilke’s work was often overlooked and she was criticized for her supposed “narcissism.” While critics such as Max Kozloff praised the work of male body artists, they “positioned women’s body art as an inquiry into surface and appearance.” Kozloff suggested that “Wilke’s and [Lynda] Benglis’ performances were styled ‘to conform to the image of the glamorous sex object – with the usual glorified epidermis.’”<sup>48</sup> But Wilke’s performance of femininity was intended to expose the ways in which gender was socially constructed. Tellingly, male body artists were rarely accused of narcissism, even when their art consisted of masturbating beneath the gallery floor, as in the case of Vito Acconci.<sup>49</sup> Wilke stated that “being an artist is difficult, an unbelievable risk, and making a female sexual statement is even riskier.”<sup>50</sup>

Evidence of the widening gap between feminists, such body works by female artists not only met resistance from the art world but were also contested by many feminists, especially those associated with the Marxist/deconstructivist strain. Jones notes that feminist critics Judith Barry (herself a pioneer in performance art) and Sandy Flitterman “questioned whether these artists reinforced what they intended to subvert, namely the nude female as object. They [saw] Wilke’s vaginal iconography and body art of ‘seduction’ as lacking a critique of the ‘fixed and rigid category of femininity’.”<sup>51</sup> Taunting her feminist critics on a 1977 poster, which featured a photograph of her naked

upper body covered with tiny chewing gum vulvae, Wilke warned, “Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism.” Wilke wanted to draw attention to the dangers of prescriptive, limiting feminism, advocating instead for a multitude of feminisms.<sup>52</sup>

Wilke was part of the Fight Censorship (FC) Group started by Anita Steckel. Comprised of women artists creating sexually explicit art, the group worked to educate the public about the dangers of censorship.<sup>53</sup> The group made public appearances on cable television and at colleges and universities where they discussed their work within the context of a broader struggle for women’s sexual and creative freedom. These artists maintained that the representation of the female body and female sexuality was a feminist statement. Anticensorship feminists “argued that theories opposed to women's representations of the female body betray a loss of heart about women's ability to challenge men's power and deny women any agency at all in the long history of heterosexuality.”<sup>54</sup>

Although many feminists criticized her practice, Wilke chose not to deny her body or her beauty, insisting on the importance of the female figure in her work. Art critic Dave Hickey addressed the subject of beauty extensively in his 1993 book *The Invisible Dragon*. “The task of beauty is to enfranchise the audience and acknowledge its power—to designate a territory of shared values between the image and its beholder and then, in this territory, to advance an argument by valorizing the picture’s problematic content. Without the urgent intention of reconstructing the beholder’s view of things, the image has no reason to exist, much less to be beautiful,” Hickey argued.<sup>55</sup> Calling herself a “living sculpture,” Wilke used her naked body to claim the prerogative of women to use themselves in their work. She simultaneously challenged the patriarchal notion of

women as commodities. In her work titled *Exchange Values*, the text that accompanies the photographs states, “Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects is our value.”<sup>56</sup> Cassandra Langer observed that “Provocative quotes underscore Wilke’s pointed involvement with language and the meaning of objects.”<sup>57</sup> Although beautiful by male standards, Wilke refused woman’s traditionally passive role as the object of male contemplation. Rather, she used her body to investigate ideologies of gender, sexuality, and power and continued to do so after her beauty was ravaged by lymphoma. Wilke’s final series *Intra-Venus* (fig. 4), comprised of photographic self-portraits, watercolor self-portraits, pieces she called “Brushstrokes”—“paintings” made from the hair that fell out during Wilke’s cancer treatments—and several objects (bloody bandages mounted on paper, and pieces relating to objects by Marcel Duchamp), discredited the charge of narcissism leveled at her throughout her career; rather the work “suggested that her self-love was built of self-knowledge – and thus subversive of the patriarchal construction of the feminine body as *only* a picture, only display.”<sup>58</sup>

### **Mary Kelly**

Similarly, artist, writer and theorist Mary Kelly addressed issues of gender and sexuality, but her practice has been positioned as antithetical to Wilke’s. She resolutely avoided photography; rather, she attempted the “‘visualization’ of the mother/woman without ‘picturing’ her.”<sup>59</sup> Kelly set out to de-objectify the object that is the mother. She claimed there is “no preexisting sexuality, no essential femininity, and . . . to look at the process of their construction is also to see the possibility of deconstructing the

dominant forms of representing difference and justifying subordination in our social order.”<sup>60</sup> Although Kelly dealt with the taboo topic of motherhood, her work received less criticism than Wilke’s. This can be attributed to her use of psychoanalysis and post-structuralist theory, which were considered the tools of a critical artist. Mary Kelly produced *Post-Partum Document* (fig. 5 and fig. 6) in London between 1973 and 1979, and published it in book form in 1983. Conceived as an on-going process of analysis and visualization of the mother-child relationship, *PPD* is an installation in six consecutive segments, comprised of 135 small units hung on the wall in plastic boxes. “To avoid the pitfalls of conventional representations of mothers and children, which, in Kelly’s view, perpetuate the myth of women as ‘natural’ nurturers, she juxtaposed artifacts with charts, recorded conversations, and entries from her diary written and collected over a period of four years.”<sup>61</sup> Neither the mother nor the child is pictured in the work although a photograph of the artist and her son are included in the book version of *PPD*.

Kelly’s use of the patriarchal discourse of psychoanalysis was a clever maneuver. In *Excavating Post-Partum Document* Kelly speaks of her “own desire for a kind of mastery that mimes what the guys were doing.”<sup>62</sup> According to Jones, Kelly “interrogates birth and maternity as *processes* whose personal and cultural meanings, sufferings, and satisfactions are deeply ideological.”<sup>63</sup> Her dialogue with the theories of Freud and Lacan regarding psychoanalysis’ historic dismissal of the mother is integral to the emergence of a feminist motherhood: “the formulation of the maternal from within the mother’s own subjectivity.”<sup>64</sup>

What ultimately renders Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* a tour de force are the ways in which she subverts Freud and Lacan. As Craig Owens observes,

Part archive, part exhibition, part case history, the *Post-Partum Document* is also a contribution to as well as a critique of Lacanian theory. Beginning as it does with a series of diagrams taken from *Ecritis* (diagrams which Kelly presents as pictures), the work might be (mis)read as a straightforward application or illustration of psychoanalysis. It is, rather, a mother's interrogations of Lacan, an interrogation that ultimately reveals a remarkable oversight within the Lacanian narrative of the child's relation to the mother – the construction of the mother's fantasies vis-à-vis the child. Thus, the *Post-Partum Document* has proven to be a controversial work, for it appears to offer evidence of female fetishism (the various substitutes the mother invests in order to disavow separation from the child); Kelly thereby exposes a lack within the theory of fetishism, a perversion heretofore reserved for the male.<sup>65</sup>

Kelly claims female subjectivity (denied by Freud and Lacan) by uncovering maternal fantasies, articulating female desire, and taking an active role in her child's development. Through her emphasis on the intersubjectivity of mother and child, she acknowledges the simultaneous development of mother and child. In an essay titled "Communication and Cooperation in Early Infancy: a Description of Intersubjectivity," psychologist Colwyn Trevarthen defines subjectivity and intersubjectivity in the following way: "For infants to share mental control with other persons they must have two skills. First, they must be able to exhibit to others at least the rudiments of individual consciousness and intentionality. This attribute of acting agents I call *subjectivity*. In order to communicate, infants must also be able to adapt or fit this subjective control to the subjectivity of others: they must also demonstrate *intersubjectivity*."<sup>66</sup> Trevarthen concludes that the mind begins as a shared mind. Intersubjectivity opposes "the traditional Freudian psychoanalytic concept of the mother as passive and refutes the mother's traditional role as mere backdrop against which the child, especially the boy, develops. Within intersubjectivity the mother moves more freely, neither all dominating nor completely self-sacrificing. The concept of intersubjectivity not only gives the mother her own sense of agency, it also allows for infinite forms and textures of relationships between mother



and child.”<sup>67</sup> Rather than disappearing in the symbolic once her son acquires language, she asserts her subjectivity through a collaborative work with her son. “Documentation VI: Pre-writing Alphabet, Exergue, and Diary,” *PPD* consists of slates inscribed with the child’s handwriting, the mother/artist’s print-script commentary, and her typed-script narrative. Kelly’s son practices writing letters, words, and his name while she comments on his progress and transposes excerpts from her diary. The child is moving from the Lacanian *Imaginary* to the *Symbolic*, but Kelly is not a passive observer. Consequently, “Documentation VI” is evidence of both the mother’s and the child’s subjectivity.

Being a mother is defined by a relationship; one is a mother by virtue of having a child.<sup>68</sup> “Mothering is learned in the process of interaction with the individual mothered.”<sup>69</sup> Within the model of intersubjectivity, the mother affects the child, but the child also affects the mother—“the daily activities of mothering foster a ‘practicalist’ form of reasoning—an intellectual style, way of thinking, and ‘thoughtful project.’”<sup>70</sup> Intersubjective conditions of mothering modify mothers’ subjectivities as “it is too soon to insist that the baby modify its demands in light of the mother’s needs and desires. It cannot.”<sup>71</sup> Holloway goes beyond the subjectivity of the mother to address the idea of maternal development:

The inevitability of the child’s development is mirrored in maternal development. This is not just an effect of positioning the mother as an unmediated respondent to the changing needs of the child, but can be understood through the frame of unconscious intersubjective dynamics. The child’s ruthless demands place great strain on mothers to develop out of their own childlike narcissism. Being used as an extension of a controlling and narcissistic infant’s demands usually gives way gradually to a relationship with someone who—most of the time—can imagine themselves in your position and recognise the differences between you in so doing. These developments are neither inevitable nor entirely stable when they are achieved. However, the maternal figure is not simply on the receiving end of these. She changes. Every developmental move (regress as well as progress) is inevitably and interminably produced and reproduced (and changed)

intersubjectively. In this case, it has implications for other relationships and other subjectivities.<sup>72</sup>

Jones argues that *Post-Partum Document* “moved the terms of feminist art practice away from a positive notion of femininity unmediated by unconscious processes toward a psychoanalytically based conception of gender as a psychically and culturally inscribed phenomenon.”<sup>73</sup> All or parts of *Post-Partum Document* have been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions, where it received a great deal of serious critical attention and reflection. This project deeply challenged even some feminist notions of “proper” motherhood. Although Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* paved the way for contemporary artists to investigate the mother in their work, her “theoretical discourse was misunderstood as being cold and unemotional, and simultaneously condemned for being too excessive, especially in the display of her son’s scatological traces.”<sup>74</sup>

### **Hannah Wilke and Mary Kelly: Both/And**

The practices of Hannah Wilke and Mary Kelly were counterposed by critics such as Barry and Flitterman. I would argue that the work of both artists advanced our understanding of female and maternal subjectivity and paved the way for the work of the “maternalists,” a term I coined to describe contemporary artists who identify the maternal as a crucial site and subject for art making and cultural address. Wilke’s body art was condemned by many feminists (including Mary Kelly) as naïve essentialism, but art historian Amelia Jones asserts that by focusing on the body as a spectatorial image, Wilke’s critics dismiss “the possibility of an embodied visual practice.”<sup>75</sup> Jones draws on the theories of philosopher Michel Foucault. For Foucault subjectivity neither precedes nor is separate from the body—subjectivity is always embodied. “Notions of subjectivity that begin with the body must take cultural difference and historical specificity into

account; subjects cannot be divorced from the contexts in which they develop and operate.”<sup>76</sup> In Wilke’s practice her body is central to her subjectivity and agency and serves as a site of political struggle. As such, Jones claims that body art can engage the viewer in the same way Kelly’s work does—“activating the viewer, positing sexual and gender identities as fully contingent and intersectional with class, race and other aspects of identity, etc.”<sup>77</sup> Jones positions the dialectic of the essentialists and the deconstructivists as “both/and” rather than as “either/or.” As critic Craig Owens argued, “Postmodern thought is no longer binary thought (as Lyotard observes when he writes, “Thinking by means of oppositions does not correspond to the liveliest modes of postmodern knowledge [*le savoir postmoderne*]).”<sup>78</sup> Both Wilke and Kelly foregrounded the issue of female subjectivity. Wilke’s was an embodied subjectivity. She rejected mind/body dualism—her subjectivity manifested itself through her self-portraits and performances. Kelly tackled the taboo subject of motherhood, incorporating her lived experience into her work. In claiming her subjectivity, she constituted a feminist motherhood (rejecting the Freudian notion of feminine loss after pregnancy) while emphasizing the intersubjectivity of the mother-child relationship. The maternalists combine both of these strategies in their work.

### **Catherine Opie**

Artist Catherine Opie’s controversial work speaks to the obsolescence of patriarchal models of femininity. She addresses issues of gender and sexuality in her photographs, consistently challenging the status quo. Throughout her career she has focused on the idea of community: belonging, not belonging, and longing to belong. Her work is radical and challenging, but like Mary Kelly, she employs a formal language that

lends a certain credibility to her imagery. “There's a seduction that happens,” Opie says, “I use all of the classical tropes of art. They allow people to enter the work, and to look at something they might not otherwise look at.”<sup>79</sup> This visual seduction and dialogue with the history of female representation is evident in her self-portraits, which reference the traditional Madonna and Child portraits with draped fabric backdrops. *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993, fig. 7) is an atypical female nude seen from behind. Scratched into the flesh of Opie’s back are two female stick figures holding hands next to a house. When the photograph was made, Opie and her partner had recently split and she was grieving the loss of the possibility of starting a family. A poignant comment on longing to belong, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* is exterior evidence of an interior reality. Opie says of the cutting of her flesh, “yes, it hurt, but you transcend through pain.”<sup>80</sup>

*Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994, fig. 8) is a comment on Opie’s “outsider” status. Topless, she faces the camera with the word “pervert” carved into her chest in ornate letters. Covering her face is a tight black leather hood, and 23 evenly spaced needles pierce each arm. She is seated in front of an elaborate silk backdrop, the formality of which lends a certain dignity to the portrait. Of the difficult portrait, Opie says, “There are motifs that I've employed within my work—certain kinds of art-historical strategies—that have kept me from being censored, I think. If you look at my *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994), the gold background and the way that it's set up make it so formal and familiar—it's a very different strategy than if it was shot in my home, right after a play [sodomasochism] party. I think taking my work out of the documentary and putting it into another formal language has really helped me.”<sup>81</sup> Opie describes the photograph as both a reaction to the AIDS epidemic and to the exclusion of the S&M subculture from the

larger lesbian community. Treated as aberrant, *Self-Portrait/Pervert* is a reflection on the theme of not belonging. Making the personal political, Opie endeavors to expand the concept of lesbian identity in her work by showing a less visible side of the lesbian community.

In stark contrast is the tender 2004 portrait of Opie nursing her son Oliver. *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (fig. 9) Opie employs Irigaray's concept of productive mimeses. Robinson suggests that when considering the mimetic practices used by a women artists note "how she has learned her visual language – and how she has sought to advance and make that language her own."<sup>82</sup> Opie has taken the format of the traditional portrait of the Madonna and Child and made it her own. The lush red silk backdrop and the classic pose with the mother holding the nursing male infant, gazing tenderly at him, situates the image firmly within art history. But Opie's refusal to idealize her own image—her skin is blotchy and her body is burly—challenges existing models of femininity and motherhood. She is tattooed and scarred, with the "pervert" scar still visible above the baby.

By subverting societal expectations, Opie transforms the maternal. In response to *BlackBook* magazine's description of her in a 2008 profile as "Artist, Leather Dyke, PTA Mom," she says, "I am all those things."<sup>83</sup> Opie refuses a unilateral view of a woman. She is a mother, but the visual cues in her self-portraits point to a complex emotional life beyond the role of mother. As Irigaray implored, Opie refuses to be reduced to woman, mother or lesbian. The artist says, "I don't think that people necessarily have a singular identity; we move through many different chapters of our lives with many ideas about how we are living our lives, or what's happening at any given time."<sup>84</sup>

Although Opie's work has never been censored, and the reviews are usually positive, a female critic's comment in *Art and America* about *Self-Portrait/Nursing* aggravated the artist. Opie says,

She wrote "the child looks too old to be nursing." It was taken right after his first birthday and he's a tall boy, and I just thought, does he look like he's too old to be nursing because I have "pervert" carved on my chest? What are you really saying here, in parentheses? I guess a lot of people can't accept the fact that a self-proclaimed pervert can actually be a mother who breast feeds her baby, who has chickens, dogs and a family. Right, because we're not supposed to have children, don't you know that? We're going to do bad things to our children (laughter), like breast-feed them, and make sure that they're allowed to wear tutus if they want to wear tutus.<sup>85</sup>

Fear of female sexuality is rampant in our culture, and the idea of the mother as a sexual being is particularly egregious; consequently, the mother is desexualized. As a self-described butch lesbian, Opie's sexuality is doubly threatening to a patriarchal heterosexual culture.

For her Domestic series (1995-98), Opie traveled the country photographing lesbian couples and families in their homes. This examination of the cultural ideal of the family versus individual experiences refutes "the patriarchal regulation of families."<sup>86</sup> *Joanne, Betsy & Olivia, Bayside, New York* (1998) depicts the interior of the home of a couple comprised of two white women and their adopted Asian daughter. Opie describes this series as a "conversation" with Tina Barney, whose photographs portraying conventional, wealthy families, were being widely exhibited at the time. With this work, Opie challenges "the idea that a family must be defined within a heterosexual framework."<sup>87</sup>

Opie vacillates between different bodies of work claiming, "It allow[s] me to continue a long dialogue going back and forth between issues that fascinate me, and that

go beyond my own queer identity.”<sup>88</sup> Opie resists being limited by gender, sexual orientation or motherhood—her photographs are proof.

### **Renée Cox**

Like Opie, artist Renée Cox represents motherhood through her use of productive mimesis. The first pregnant woman in the Whitney Independent Study Program, Cox made The Yo-Mama Series in response to her classmates’ negative reaction to her news that she was expecting a child. *Yo Mama* (1993, fig. 10) shows Cox naked except for a pair of black high heels. She stares out at the viewer, cradling her naked two-year old son. Like Opie’s *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, it is a contemporary feminist’s interpretation of the Madonna and Child portrait. This “Madonna” claims her subjectivity. Liss comments, “Indeed, this double portrait is a heightened scene from contemporary everyday life in the process of birthing new images of mothers by choice, of black mothers breaching new possibilities for merging maternity, sexuality and work.”<sup>89</sup> The photograph measures more than seven feet high; its scale (as well as its high-heeled subject) is reminiscent of Helmut Newton’s gigantic female nudes of the 1980s. But while Newton’s photographs may appear to empower women, the women are the object rather than the subject of the photograph. The women are styled with the male gaze in mind: coiffed hair, make-up, large breasts, and minimal pubic hair. Cox is the subject of her photograph. She challenges the viewer to objectify “her Superwoman nakedness.”<sup>90</sup>

Of the photograph, Cox says,

The Yo Mama has a broad appeal particularly to women of all ages, and all ethnic backgrounds. It is an assertive and strong image of motherhood, which turns against certain stereotypes of mothers as passive, helpless and victimized. It is about empowerment, there is a humor into it as well. . . . Women have been conditioned to the fact that once they decide to have children suddenly everything

in their life is supposed to stop. My premise is that you incorporate your child into your life and you continue to do what motivates you.<sup>91</sup>

The concept of the mother/child relationship as intersubjective is present in *Yo Mama*; mother and child appear fused. Jones observes, “Cox, like Kelly, presents a drastically revised picture of maternity that revolves around its *relational* aspect (as a developmental exchange with the infant or child) rather than idealizing it.”<sup>92</sup>

Cox’s work challenges racism as well as sexism and “calls into question the assumption of whiteness underlying Western myths of maternity.”<sup>93</sup> Arendell states, “Motherhood ideology is entwined with idealized notions of the family, presuming the institution and image of the idealized White, middle-class heterosexual couple with its children in a self-contained family unit.”<sup>94</sup> With *Yo Mama goes to the Hamptons* (1994) and *Yo Mama Feeding* (1993), Cox offers an alternative history—one that empowers black women. In *Yo Mama Feeding*, the Virgin Mary, the most recognized icon in the western world, is now re-interpreted as a woman of color. Cox asserts that “viewers now become forced to study the steady barrage of negative images and attitudes towards other civilizations, and conclude that tolerance and respect are essential for liberating the American nation of polarization.”<sup>95</sup>

Cox asserts that there is an absence of religious imagery to which the black community can relate. She has made images of herself as a nun, a pieta, and in a multi-paneled photograph, Jesus as a black man. Her most controversial work was *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* (1996). A reinterpretation of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, this five-panel photograph depicts the artist as a nude female Christ figure surrounded by black apostles, with the exception of Judas, who is white. *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* outraged Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, pitting him against the Brooklyn Museum of Art. (In 1999



he tried unsuccessfully to shut down the “Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection” exhibition at the museum that included a painting of the Virgin Mary by Anglo-African artist Chris Ofili, which incorporated elephant dung.) Giuliani claimed Cox’s photograph was offensive to Catholics and called for a commission to set decency standards for art on display in public museums, noting that the Brooklyn Museum receives public funding.

There is also an erotic component to *Yo Mama*. Claiming her sexuality as Wilke did, Cox comments, “*Yo Mama's masculinized stance in high heeled shoes defies gender stereotypes of woman as a yielding eroticized image of the heterosexual male gaze and desire.*”<sup>96</sup> At first glance, Cox could be a woman in a photograph by Newton, but Cox’s sexuality is her own; it is not intended for the viewer. Cox wears high heels, but her art transforms this sexual and feminized trope into a statement of power and independence. As one critic observed, “*Yo Mama is an ironic dig at society’s rending of the female parent into Madonna and whore.*”<sup>97</sup> A sexual mother is untenable in American society. Her purpose is to nurture, and sexual agency runs counter to this project. The “good” mother belongs to her child, her sexuality limited and constrained by her reproductive function.

Cox’s *Yo Mama, the Statue* (1993, fig. 11) is a personal comment on the denial of maternal sexuality. Toward the end of her pregnancy, Cox’s husband refused her sexual advances, explaining he was not attracted to her.<sup>98</sup> Evidence of the larger patriarchal repression of maternal erotics and desire, this private insult elicited a public response from Cox. She made a white plaster cast from her pregnant body. When the piece is exhibited, it is accompanied by an audiotape with the artist’s voice. Before the viewer

sees the sculpture, Cox is heard alternately asking “So baby, do you want to fuck tonight?” and “Don’t fuck with me.” Cox’s Yo Mama portraits are an act of defiance “directed against the mutual exclusivities that separate women’s sexuality from motherhood and, in turn, maternal eroticism from power.”<sup>99</sup>

Cox has been called narcissistic by critics Michael Kimmelman and Roberta Smith – an insult leveled at Wilke as well. Both Wilke and Cox have beautiful bodies by contemporary standards. If a beautiful woman uses her body she is deemed narcissistic. In a patriarchal culture it is unacceptable for an attractive women to use her body to mediate her subjectivity; she is already spoken for. Tellingly, no one is calling Opie narcissistic.

### **Janine Antoni**

Artist Janine Antoni claims her body “is a funnel through which the world is poured.”<sup>100</sup> Her work is a dialogue with the history of art and male artists. In *Gnaw* (1992) she chewed on two 600-pound blocks of chocolate and lard reminiscent of Donald Judd’s minimal cubes. In *Loving Care* (1993, fig. 12) she dipped her long hair in black dye and mopped the floor. The piece was made famous by the black and white photographs of the event, which were reminiscent of Hans Namuth’s photographs of abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock working on a painting. Through productive mimeses she was “mimicking the making of an action painting and claiming a piece of the territory that had been occupied primarily by male artists.”<sup>101</sup> She simultaneously referenced Yves Klein’s use of women as paintbrushes in his *Anthropometry* series of the 1960s.

Before Antoni became a mother, she examined her relationship with her mother.

The first piece she made after graduating from Yale in 1989 was a set of wall impressions of her breast and nipple, as well as three latex nipples for a bottle and the plastic packing in which they came. Titled *Wean* (1990, fig. 13), it is a comment on the various stages of separation between a child and mother, and the weaning into culture. *Wean* addresses Antoni's separation from her own mother. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth observes that, like Mary Kelly's influential *Post-Partum Document*, these objects are relics of an investment in the body. Kelly's work documents the mother's separation; Antoni's the daughter's.<sup>102</sup> *Wean* is a poignant example of the intersubjectivity that remains between mother and child long after the child becomes an adult and is no longer dependent on the mother's body for sustenance. This lifelong identification is supported by psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott's theory that children proceed from "absolute dependence, rapidly changing to relative dependence, and always travelling towards (but never reaching), independence."<sup>103</sup> Antoni's engagement with the theme of motherhood continued in works like *Momme* (1995), *Coddle* (1999), and *2038* (2000), a color photograph in which the artist, naked in a bathtub, seems to be nursing the cow whose tag number gives the image its name.

An extended investigation into motherhood, Antoni's exhibition "Up Against" at Luhring Augustine in the fall of 2009 postdated the birth of her daughter Indra. *Inhabit* (2009, fig. 14) shows the artist suspended by a harness, while her body is enclosed in a dollhouse filled with miniaturized objects similar to those found in her real house. A spider has taken up residency in the kitchen and has attached its web to a bowl of fruit on one side and to a wall on the other. "Antoni's suspension is, itself, ambiguous. It is not entirely clear whether we should regard her as the weaver of her own suspending web, or

as a victim caught in the filaments of its harness strings. The double read is an inescapable response.”<sup>104</sup> Antoni is aware that she is inhabiting an in-between space: “For my image, I wanted the reading to sit somewhere between being suspended and ascending and either entrapped or inside the structure of support, which to me is motherhood. One minute you just want to rip your hair out and the next minute you're melting with joy. So I was trying to get this weird place in the image where the house is trapping me but we have grown together.”<sup>105</sup> It is precisely this ambiguity, this double meaning, which makes Antoni's representation of motherhood radical. This obscurity also connects *Inhabit* to her older work. In Antoni's *Lick and Lather* (1994), fourteen self-portrait busts—seven cast from chocolate and seven from soap—face one another on pedestals. Through her licking and washing of the work, the details have become obscured. In her essay on Antoni, Janet Hand suggests, “In the busts' self-similarity and imperfection, I get a sense that their identity and their meanings always, in advance, evade us and will partially continue to do so.”<sup>106</sup> Antoni's changeable mother is the feminist mother. Liss notes, “It is the feminist mother's admission that ambiguity is often the norm, an ambiguity that constantly tears and heals between the mother self and her professional self, between the mother self and her sexual self, between the mother self and her own child self.”<sup>107</sup>

In a dialogue with art history, *Inhabit* is influenced by Louise Bourgeois's *Maman* (1999), the celebrated sculpture of a giant female spider and alludes to the strength of the mother with metaphors of spinning, weaving, nurture, and protection. Bourgeois said, “The Spider is an ode to my mother. She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was

in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.”<sup>108</sup>

*Inhabit* is also reminiscent of Bourgeois’ *Femme-Maison* drawings from 1946-47, and share a theme of entrapment. Antoni says of her process, “I’m consciously in dialogue with [art] history and feminist ideas. I also feel that because I worked with my mother I should work with my daughter, that we need to hear more from women artists about mothering.”<sup>109</sup>

In the photograph *One Another* (2008, fig. 15) Antoni’s daughter Indra feeds her mother’s belly button with a small plastic spoon while holding a sippy-cup in her other hand. Antoni says,

The gesture in this photograph first happened when Indra was learning to feed herself. She has always been completely fixated on my belly button. Psychologists talk a lot about transitional objects and my belly button was her transitional object. However, it isn’t a true transitional object because she replaced my breasts with my belly button, as opposed to a teddy bear or a blanket. Even now, at five, she still likes to sleep with her finger in it. If she falls down, she wants to put her finger there for comfort, like a security blanket. She calls my belly her belly. “Give me my belly,” she says. One time when I was feeding her she wanted to feed my belly button. I was struck by the spirit of reciprocity in her gesture. There was something about it that was very touching. Also, she was making my work. I can’t claim that piece.<sup>110</sup>

This image embodies the intersubjectivity of the relationship between a mother and child, and the reciprocal nature, which is often overlooked. Antoni observes, “Somehow she becomes the mother and her gesture, like an umbilical cord, turns me into a fetus.”<sup>111</sup>

While Antoni credits her daughter for the image, it is her active maternal thinking that illuminates these instances of intersubjective exchange.

## **Conclusion**

Representing the mother in contemporary art is not without risk. Owens observes, “recent analyses of the ‘enunciative apparatus’ of visual representation – its poles of emission and reception – confirm, the representational systems of the West admit only one vision – that of the constitutive male subject – or, rather, they posit the subject of representation as absolutely centered, unitary, masculine. The postmodernist work attempts to upset the reassuring stability of that mastering position.”<sup>112</sup> In this representational system, even when woman appears to be the subject she is, in fact, the object. This refusal to “be represented by” is at the heart of the maternalists’s work; the mother is claimed for, and by, the mother. Each artist speaks for herself rather than being spoken for— philosopher Luce Irigaray terms this *parler-femme*. “It remains for women artists to negotiate new relationships to the non-colonized body and to find ways of speaking the *difference* of femininity, which is not bound to negation and otherness.”<sup>113</sup> As I have discussed, some feminist artists “believe that no representation of the female body in our culture can be free from phallic prejudice.”<sup>114</sup> In response to feminist claims that mimetic representation perpetuates the objectification of women, I argue that to avoid representation only contributes to their invisibility and lack of subjectivity. If sight is privileged, then is it not empowering for a woman to see herself, to represent herself, and are other women not empowered by her representation? In her discussion of body art, Jones claims, “the issue of subjectivity, especially in its sexual/gendered dimension, as *the* central issue of postmodernism.”<sup>115</sup> Acknowledging the importance of their lived experience, the maternalists, Catherine Opie, Renée Cox, and Janine Antoni, are the complex subjects of their own inquiry.

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- <sup>1</sup> Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 160.
- <sup>2</sup> Ann Snitow, "Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading," *Feminist Review*, no. 40 (Spring 1992): 37.
- <sup>3</sup> Terry Arendell, "Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62, no. 4 (Nov. 2000): 1194.
- <sup>4</sup> Umansky, *Motherhood*, 144-45.
- <sup>5</sup> Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xiv.
- <sup>6</sup> Amelia Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies, Feminist Conflicts, Feminist Histories," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996), 27.
- <sup>7</sup> Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Matthews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (September 1987): 338.
- <sup>8</sup> Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies," 28.
- <sup>9</sup> Gouma-Peterson and Matthews, "The Feminist Critique," 335.
- <sup>10</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 124.
- <sup>11</sup> Andrea Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xv.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.
- <sup>13</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 29.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.
- <sup>18</sup> Samuel Slipp, *The Freudian Mystique: Freud, Women, and Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 92-93.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 342.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Leo Rubinfien, "Through Western Eyes," *Art in America* 66, no. 5 (September/October 1978): 75.
- <sup>25</sup> Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 146.
- <sup>26</sup> Blake Gopnik, "Feminism & Art," *Washington Post*, April 22, 2007.
- <sup>27</sup> Whitney Chadwick. *Women, Art, and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 356-57.
- <sup>28</sup> Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle As a Woman Artist* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 35.

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- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., 36.
- <sup>30</sup> Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies," 27.
- <sup>31</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 55.
- <sup>32</sup> Amelia Jones, "The 'Sexual Politics' of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context," in *Sexual Politics*, 54.
- <sup>33</sup> Chadwick, *Women*, 358.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Hilton Kramer, "Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party' Comes to Brooklyn Museum," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1980.
- <sup>36</sup> Chicago, *Through the Flower*, xi.
- <sup>37</sup> Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies," 27.
- <sup>38</sup> Chadwick, "Negotiating," 524.
- <sup>39</sup> Jennie Klein, "Keeping up with the Jones's," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 62, no. 2 (May 1999): 116.
- <sup>40</sup> Chadwick, *Women*, 358.
- <sup>41</sup> Lippard, *From the Center*, 138.
- <sup>42</sup> Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies," 28.
- <sup>43</sup> Chadwick, *Women*, 367.
- <sup>44</sup> Lippard, *From the Center*, 25.
- <sup>45</sup> Anette Kubitz, "Rereading the Readings of *The Dinner Party* in Europe," in *Sexual Politics*, 171-173.
- <sup>46</sup> Amelia Jones, "Everybody Dies . . . Even the Gorgeous: Resurrecting the Work of Hannah Wilke," 2003, <http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/wilke%20in%20markszine03.pdf>.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Chadwick, *Women*, 369.
- <sup>49</sup> One notable exception was Rosalind Krauss's article in the 1976 issue of *October* titled "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," which focused on the narcissism of both male and female body artists.
- <sup>50</sup> Richard Meyer, "Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s," in *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* ed. Cornelia H. Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 381.
- <sup>51</sup> Jones, "Everybody Dies," <http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/wilke%20in%20markszine03.pdf>.
- <sup>52</sup> Kubitz, "Rereading the Readings of *The Dinner Party* in Europe," 171.
- <sup>53</sup> Carol Jacobsen, "Redefining Censorship: A Feminist View," *Art Journal* 50, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 46.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup> Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 9-10.
- <sup>56</sup> Cassandra Langer, "Review: [untitled]." *Woman's Art Journal* 25, no. 1, Spring/Summer 2004: 64.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Jones, "Everybody Dies," <http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/wilke%20in%20markszine03.pdf>.



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- <sup>59</sup> Lucy Lippard, "Foreword," in *Post-Partum Document*, ed. Mary Kelly (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), xii.
- <sup>60</sup> Gouma-Peterson and Matthews, "Feminist," 226.
- <sup>61</sup> Kubitz, "Rereading the Readings of *The Dinner Party* in Europe," 157.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.
- <sup>63</sup> Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies," in *Sexual Politics*, 27.
- <sup>64</sup> Liss, *Feminist Art*, xx.
- <sup>65</sup> Owens, "The Discourse of Others." In *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 64.
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- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.
- <sup>68</sup> Wendy Holloway, "From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity," *International Journal of Critical Psychology* 2, 19.
- <sup>69</sup> Arendell, "Conceiving," 1194.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>71</sup> Holloway, "From Motherhood," 15.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.
- <sup>73</sup> Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies," 27.
- <sup>74</sup> Liss, *Feminist Art*, 34.
- <sup>75</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 22.
- <sup>76</sup> Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 84.
- <sup>77</sup> Jones, *Body Art*, 22.
- <sup>78</sup> Owens, "Discourse," 62.
- <sup>79</sup> Jean Dykstra, "Opie: The Community of Difference," *Art in America* 96, no. 11 (December 2008): 128-35.
- <sup>80</sup> Marie-Claire MacPhee, "Catherine Opie," *No More Potlucks*, no.1 (January/February 2009): 59.
- <sup>81</sup> A.M. Homes, "Photo Op," *Modern Painters* (October 2008): 75.
- <sup>82</sup> Robinson, *Reading Art*, 18.
- <sup>83</sup> Jen Graves, "Busting Out," *The Stranger* (March 23-39, 2006): <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=31215&mode=print>.
- <sup>84</sup> MacPhee, "Opie," 60.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>86</sup> Dykstra, "Opie: The Community of Difference," 134.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>88</sup> MacPhee, "Opie," 60.
- <sup>89</sup> Liss, 98.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>91</sup> Cristineros Parravicini, "Renée Cox," *Virus*, no. 14 (October-November 1998), <http://www.undo.net/it/magazines/933692078>.
- <sup>92</sup> Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies," 27.

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- <sup>93</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>94</sup> Arendell, "Conceiving," 1194.
- <sup>95</sup> Parravicini, "Renée Cox," <http://www.undo.net/it/magazines/933692078>.
- <sup>96</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>97</sup> Liss, *Feminist Art*, 101.
- <sup>98</sup> Ibid., 99.
- <sup>99</sup> Ibid., 100.
- <sup>100</sup> Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh, "The Beautiful Trap: Janine Antoni's Body Art." *Border Crossings* 29, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 38-54, <http://www.oclc.org/>.
- <sup>101</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>102</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Antoni's Difference." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 129-70.
- <sup>103</sup> Holloway, "Motherhood," 26-27.
- <sup>104</sup> Enright and Walsh, "The Beautiful Trap," <http://www.oclc.org/>.
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>106</sup> Janet Hand, "Disappearing acts: an impossibility of identity" in *Other Than Identity: The Subject, Politics and Art* ed. by Juliet Steyn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 224.
- <sup>107</sup> Liss, *Feminist Art*, xvii.
- <sup>108</sup> Louise Bourgeois, quoted in Kirstie Beaven's "Louise Bourgeois: Maman," *Tate Blog*, Summer 2010, <http://blog.tate.org.uk/?p=668>.
- <sup>109</sup> Enright and Walsh, "The Beautiful Trap," <http://www.oclc.org/>.
- <sup>110</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>111</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>112</sup> Owens, "Discourse," 58.
- <sup>113</sup> Diana Fuss, "The Risk of Essence," in *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology, 1968-2000* ed. Hilary Robinson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 527.
- <sup>114</sup> Ibid., 71.
- <sup>115</sup> Jones, *Body Art*, 31.



**Figure 1**

Judy Chicago, *Birth Tear/Tear*, 1982  
Collection of The Albuquerque Museum of Art, Albuquerque  
As reproduced on: <http://www.judychicago.com>



**Figure 2**

Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1975-79  
Installation view, Wing One, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art  
Collection of the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn  
As reproduced on: <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org>



**Figure 3**

Hannah Wilke, S.O.S. Starification Object Series, 1974-82  
Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
As reproduced on: <http://www.moma.org>





**Figure 4**

Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus No. 4*, 1992-93  
Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive  
As reproduced on: <http://on www.hannahwilke.com>



**Figure 5**

Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document, Introduction*, 1973  
Collection of Eileen Norton, Santa Monica  
As reproduced on: <http://www.marykellyartist.com>

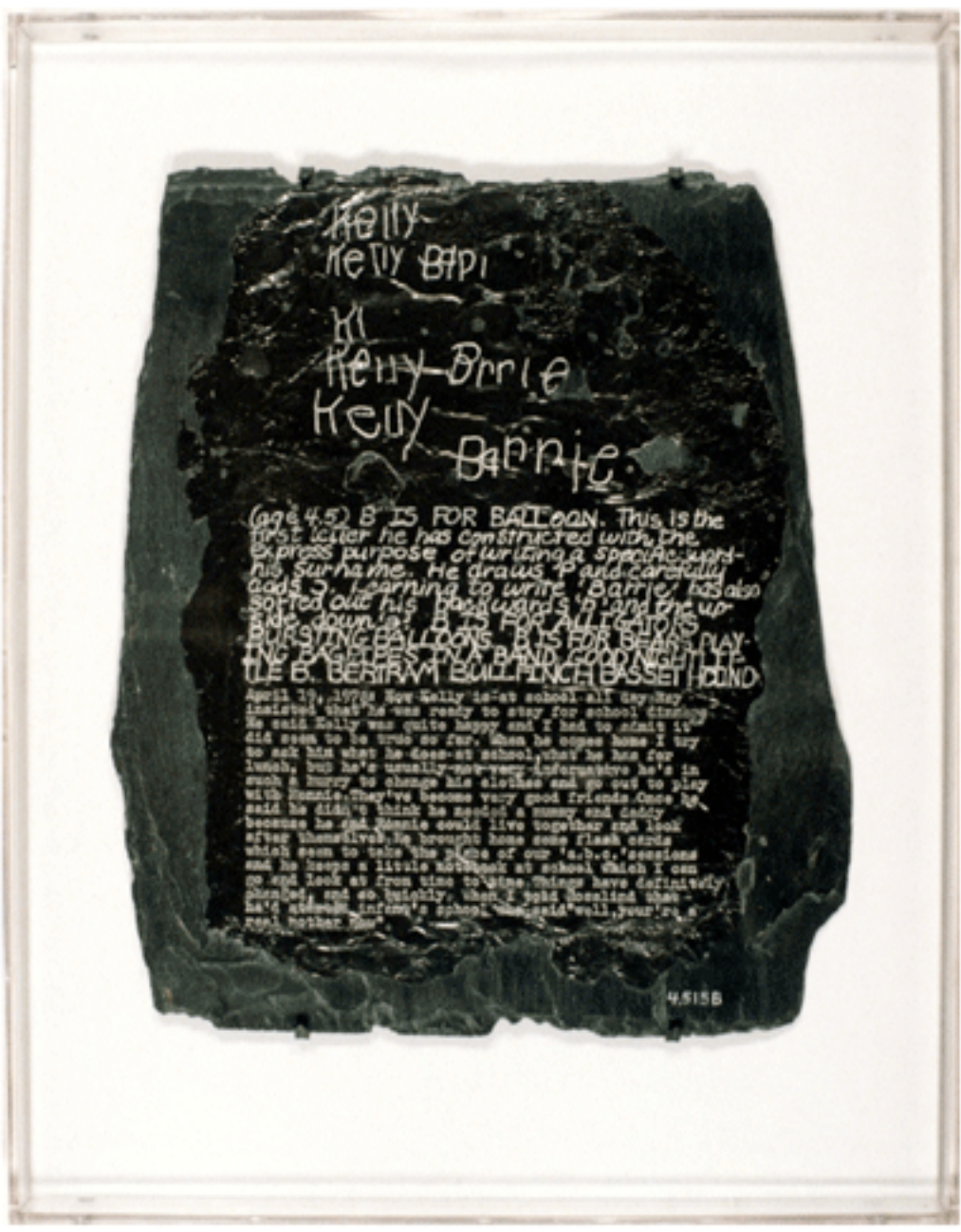


Figure 6

Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document, Documentation VI*  
*Pre-writing Alphabet, Exergue and Diary* (Detail), 1978  
Collection of Arts Council of Great Britain  
As reproduced on: <http://www.marykellyartist.com>





**Figure 7**

Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles  
As reproduced on: <http://www.regenprojects.com>



**Figure 8**

Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles  
As reproduced on: <http://www.regenprojects.com>





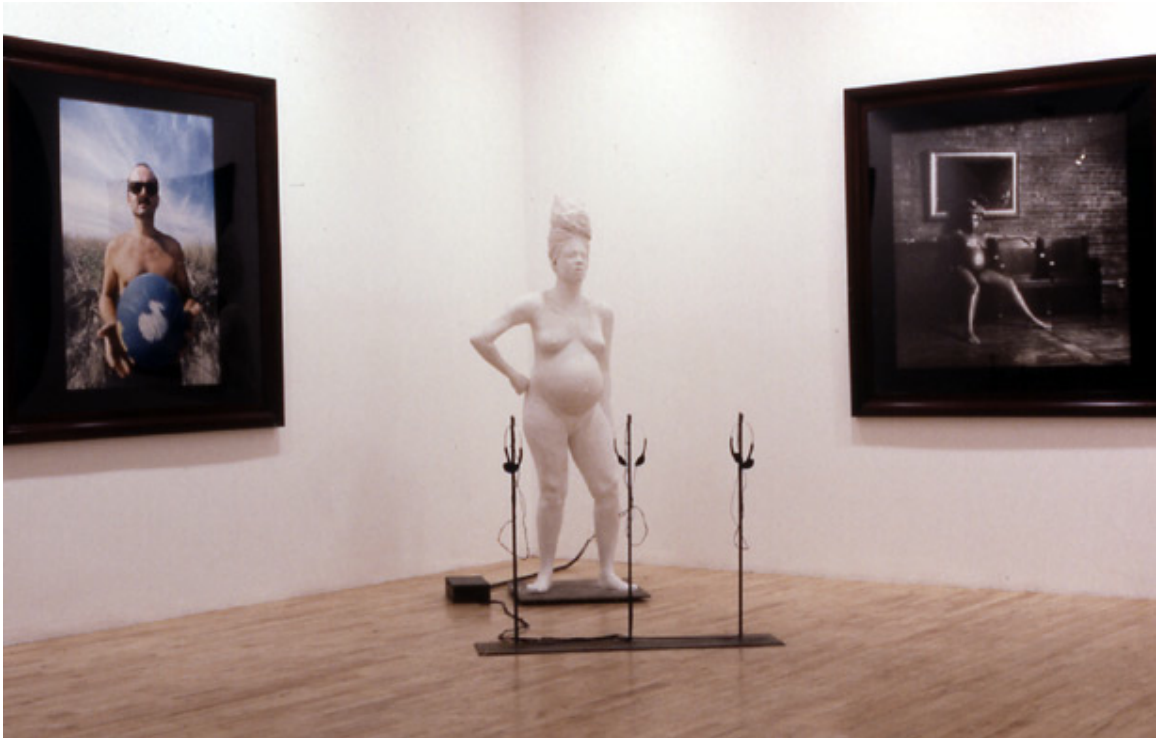
**Figure 9**

Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004  
Regen Projects, Los Angeles  
As reproduced on: <http://www.regenprojects.com>



**Figure 10**

Renée Cox, *Yo Mama*, 1993  
As reproduced on: <http://www.reneecox.com>



**Figure 11**

Renée Cox, *Yo Mama, the Statue*, 1993

Installation view

As reproduced on: <http://www.reneecox.org>



**Figure 12**

Janine Antoni, *Loving Care*, 1993  
Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York  
As reproduced on: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com>



**Figure 13**

Janine Antoni, *Wean*, 1990  
Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York  
As reproduced on: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com>





**Figure 14**

Janine Antoni, *Inhabit*, 2009  
Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York  
As reproduced on: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com>





**Figure 15**

Janine Antoni, *One another*, 2008  
Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York  
As reproduced on: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com>

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## ABSTRACT

Feminism and motherhood have been perceived as incompatible. The second-wave of the Women's Movement of the 1960s focused on equality of the sexes and resulted in women rejecting the "traditional" female roles of wife and mother. It was not procreation or mothering per se with which feminism took issue, but the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which limited the identity of a woman to "mother" and devalued the labor of mother work. The politics of the Women's Movement permeated the art world, and members of the feminist art movement endeavored to provide alternative, positive images of women to counter the objectification of women in art and popular culture. Generally excluded from this presentation of positive female imagery was motherhood. Contemporary artists Catherine Opie, Renée Cox and Janine Antoni represent the mother. Their work as, what I call, maternalists, is a feminist statement claiming the subjectivity of the mother historically denied. The works of second-wave feminist artists Hannah Wilke and Mary Kelly are both critical to the work of these contemporary artists as was the epistemological shift in thinking about female and maternal subjectivity.