The Feminist Art Project

TFAP@CAA DAY OF PANELS
The M Word
College Art Association Annual Conference 2014
Saturday, February 15, 2014 – 9am-5pm
Columbia College Chicago – Stage TWO

ABSTRACT

Panel: Revisiting M/E/A/N/I/N/G #12

Round Table Discussion

In 1992, Susan Bee and Mira Schor, editors of the art journal M/E/A/N/I/N/G, published FORUM: ON MOTHERHOOD, ART, AND APPLE PIE. They invited a group of artist/mothers to respond to a series of questions about their artistic careers and lives as mothers. Although none of the women regretted becoming mothers, most of them talked about their difficult choices, and how they maintained a strict separation between family and studio practice. Twenty years later, we believe we are seeing many more women who are interested in integrating their familial and artistic lives. After a short statement from Susan Bee, five artists respond to the M/E/A/N/I/N/G issue in relationship to their lives and work now.

Papers

Sharon Butler, Brown University

Three decades after the advent of women’s lib, high-achieving women like Anne-Marie Slaughter – former director of policy planning at the State Department and Princeton professor, now president and CEO of the New America Foundation – continue to explore “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” (The Atlantic July/August 2012), driving home the difficulties of balancing motherhood with a demanding career. Working mothers in the creative community face unique challenges. How do we answer a creative calling while satisfying the daily demands of raising children? Most people understand why women with prestigious, high-paying jobs feel the need to juggle parenting and a professional life, but artists generally receive little compensation for their work, making dedication to an art practice seem selfish and unnecessary to the outside world. Our choices often conflict with societal norms and traditional values. My daughter is fourteen-years-old, and, to be completely honest, parenting, conditioned by a difficult divorce, has been a heart-wrenching experience. Divorce can lead to ongoing custody disputes, parental alienation, and other traumatic parenting experiences that are sometimes exacerbated by our non-traditional life choices.

Laura Letinsky, University of Chicago

In reading over the M/E/A/N/I/N/G issue that inspired this panel I’m struck by this past set of conversations' similarity to today’s; the gratitude and pleasure at having a child, a family, a life, and then, the unrelenting pressure of lower working wages and our art’s valuation in tandem with the shortened working days due to a constant juggling of limited time and energy for money- and art-making, schmoozing, laundry, love, and personal hygiene. A late baby-boomer, I aligned myself with the feminist movement, Betty Freidan and Gloria Steinem my heroines. Heartened by the glitteriness of Cosmo and Camille Paglia, even if "having it all" was not necessarily something I ever really believed was possible, I did intend to live a life I made. That is, I become financially independent, installed myself within the so called enlightened environs of academia, and identified as an artist whose marginality, I thought, necessitated wants and needs that if not in direct opposition to, at least afforded alternatives to the mainstream. Success; on some levels, but a much higher price than I expected. There are many days I feel dismayed by how little has changed both in my immediate circumstances and on the global level. I try to take sustenance and breath hopefulness in the day to day tasks and pleasures that I can effect in the dearth of ground-shaking change, at least an ever so slight shifting of the field.
**Irene Lusztig**, University of California, Santa Cruz

Many of the submissions from the 1992 issue of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* begin with apologies for being late, being hopelessly behind, being too busy with kids, being too tired to think after the kids go to bed, being unable to actually spend enough time on the project of answering the questions. The occasion of turning in my own paragraph three days late, after my child has gone to bed (with apologies... and the admission that I was not yet able to spend as much as I had hoped reviewing the magazine) seems like it perhaps can inspire a space for reflecting more broadly on the notion of the maternal apology. In fact, the apology is a fitting place to start: at least one thing hasn’t changed at all since 1992! As mothers of young children we are always behind, always late, always doing a bad job, always not doing enough, and in a constant state of apology. Maybe this is a useful place to start in framing my own response, in 2014, to reading these writings by mother artists struggling with similar questions in 1992. One thing that strikes me across many of the responses in the magazine is how many of the narratives are narratives of isolation, narratives of being alone with these difficult problems - there are stories of hiding pregnancies, of being afraid to take babies to art openings, of worrying about the toll maternity inevitably takes on careers, even stories of hoping no one in the art world finds out that there are children. Most of these women recognize these circumstances as unfair and sexist, but few of them propose structural, political, or collective solutions. I certainly have experienced some of these unfair and sexist circumstances, and I don’t pretend to have answers, but my provocation to artist-mothers is that we can do better in our conversations about these questions (the day of panels at CAA is exactly the kind of conversation that should be happening all the time). My maybe utopian hope is that, as artist mothers, we can make work that takes on some of these questions directly; and that if no one wants to show that kind of work in the art world we can make our own spaces and networks where serious work engaging with maternal experience can circulate. Thinking of work explicitly in terms of its political gesture, in terms of solidarity with others, in terms of collective conversation might be the first step towards addressing these problems of work-life balance, of childcare, of income as the systemic political and economic questions that they actually are. These aren’t the problems of individual artists, or even of individual women, they are everyone’s problems.

**Beverly Naidus**, University of Washington, Tacoma

When *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* #12 was published in 1992, I had a long list of why I was not EVER going to be a mom. A couple of years later, a female art critic, a writer who had written about my work and liked me quite a bit, was shocked to learn that I was pregnant. Her reaction to my news could be described as a mixture of horror, despair and indignation. She said quite boldly, "You might as well throw away your career." My presentation will briefly reflect on the events and factors that caused me to change my mind about parenting, the stereotypes about women artists that I continue to unearth, deconstruct and confront and how attitudes advocated by liberal, feminist artists require some re-evaluation. I will put forth a more radical way of understanding notions of success and suggest how models of nourishing creative communities have shifted in the past few decades.

**Jennifer Wroblewski**, Purchase College School of Art and Design

I suspect that since the original publications of the *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* #12 Forum: on Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie, the landscape has changed significantly as the art discourse has broadened to accommodate, even value, the perspectives of all kinds of artists, including women and mothers. Meanwhile, artist mothers seem to face pressures and discrimination beyond the concerns of our childless and/or male colleagues (from workable childcare to appropriate exhibition opportunities and worthwhile critical response to our work, etc) Is it possible that this discrimination is an expression of the internalization of a struggle since resolved, or are the pressures and dismissals we feel in our dual roles are still, in fact, real and perilous? This question is raised repeatedly in the forum, and I am curious to address whether in the intervening years anything has changed. Is it the prerogative of the contemporary mother artist to acknowledge and transcend the legacy of strife that has brought us to now? Would our lives and our work be different if we could disabuse ourselves of an out-of-date expectation of professional dismissal or the dismissal of gendered or domestic content in our work? Can we name a quorum of mother artists who have done so?