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: Mothers / Artists / Children

Chair: Rachel Epp Buller, Bethel College

What are the implications when an artist brings her children into her work? Where is the line between collaboration and exploitation? When can children give consent, or even be considered artists in their own right? This panel addresses twentieth-century and contemporary incarnations of the often-controversial mother / artist / child triangle.

Papers

Lynn Somers-Davis, Drew University

When the Artist is a Mother: the Risks and Rewards of “Family Pictures”

The embodiment of a mother’s desire, in its most visceral physical, psychological, and emotional states, shapes the photographic oeuvre of Sally Mann. This paper looks at the ways in which maternal desire, ambition, and intellectual acuity are involved in work that turns traditional narratives of the “feminine” on their head. Mann uses the material of her life to create and explore powerful new myths of motherhood while also questioning our received notions of childhood innocence. Mann’s beguiling photographs of her children—typically nude, often verging on the erotic—climax in a vision of the sublime that has at the same time left her open to accusations of questionable morality and even child abuse. Made with a large format camera, these pristine images emerge from a depth of liquid blackness, resulting in surfaces redolent with sumptuous pictorial effects that recall the Late Victorian Romanticism of Julia Margaret Cameron and Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll). Unlike her predecessors, however, Mann’s images have also been described as brutal in their refusal to romanticize common childhood moments—cuts and scrapes, wet beds, bloody noses, and fluidly erotic nudity and play. In addition, she unabashedly aestheticizes her “family pictures.” As a result, much of the criticism directed at Mann revolves around ethical debates of what a “good mother” would do in these situations: clean up the wound or get the camera and frame the shot.

Through examining the work of Mann and that of Louise Bourgeois, I pose the following questions: Can we identify anything specific to the “mother-artist’s“ vision? Can we see patterns in the role that desire, ambivalence, and even empathy (or lack thereof) play in such work? The paper seeks to create a critical framework through which to address these questions.

Jill Miller, San Francisco Art Institute, Visiting Faculty in Interdisciplinary Studies

Clash of the Tiny: Living and Working with Two Small Boys

Jill Miller’s recent series Homeschooled examines the constraints and opportunities that motherhood creates for visual artists. By collaborating with her two young sons, her body of work explores their relationships through use of video, photography, drawing and sculpture. In order to authentically create these works, Miller undertook a six month study of her own “homeschooling” with her older son. Using their domestic quarters as a backdrop, she creates an ongoing body of work that examines family constructs, the maternal-child relationship, and the ways that parenthood may be considered a locus for creativity rather than a distraction or an obstacle in the making process.
**Marni Kotak**, Artist, Microscope Gallery, New York City

**A Child Is a Work of Art**

My work with my son Ajax, aka Baby X, began with his live gallery birth in my durational performance/exhibition *The Birth of Baby X* at Microscope Gallery in Brooklyn, NY, on October 25, 2011, and now continues through a project called *Raising Baby X*, in which I am re-contextualizing the everyday act of raising a child as performance art from the perspectives of both mother and child.

For *The Birth of Baby X*, the entire gallery was installed to create my ideal homebirth center, and the show, culminating in the birth, entailed the weeks spent in the space preparing physically and mentally for labor, and the days after, nursing and caring for the baby. The follow up to this piece, *Raising Baby X*, has evolved to focus on *Raising Baby X: Little Brother*, an ongoing video collaboration between myself and my son, where I outfit Ajax with a small wearable video camera capturing the intricacies of his infancy and toddlerhood from his own perspective, flipping the traditional viewpoint of early childhood documentation.

Many have accused me of exploiting my child by making his birth and life into my art. My response has been that the gallery is my temple, and art is my spiritual practice and that therefore, in giving birth to Ajax in an art gallery, and raising him as a work of art, I am honoring his life in a deeply spiritual manner. It is my premise that life – in this instance both mine and Ajax’s lives – is itself is the work of art, and that therefore how I give birth and raise my child are part of an ongoing artistic process.

**Lise Haller Baggesen**, Artist, Chicago

**Children are a People**

The title of this paper *Children are a People* infers the (progressive) perspective that children are not only fully-fledged human beings but also members of a group with its own cultural significance, and that collaboration with them would therefore imply navigating a shared (psychological) space with diplomacy and curiosity.

In it, I will examine some of the cultural anxiety about the intersection of childhood, motherhood, and art making, but also how this contested territory—the intersection of family life and artistic practice—can be fertile ground on which a bilateral knowledge transfer, based on trust between adults and children, can serve as starting points for new artistic strategies.

The issue of “exploitation” in relation to children as collaborative art producers can only arise because we, collectively, are not taking children seriously as cultural agents, and as (critical) producers and consumers of cultural capital and artistic projects, alongside adults.

Even to many of those who are open to the benefits of art education for kids, the idea of kids as topics or as participants in the “real” art world remains an uneasy notion, as it is assumed that they don’t “get it” and henceforth can have no real investment in it.

I order to challenge this assumption I will relate my own experience from collaborating with my kid(s) as artistic producers, performers and consumers, mainly from my collaboration with my (then) 4-year old son, Adam, but also draw from my own childhood (art) experience.

**Courtney Kessel**, Independent Artist and Exhibitions Coordinator, The Dairy Barn Arts Center

**You and me: Performing Visibility**

Through sculpture, performance, and video, my work strives to make visible the quiet, understated, and often unseen love and labor of motherhood. The work transcends the local binary of public/private and extends into the repositioning of the ongoing, non-narrative, excessive dialogic flow that occurs within the domestic space. I hope to offer a space that examines language and maternity through a feminist lens thereby opening a dialog between what is seen and not seen.
My work, both curated and performed, seeks to address the intimacy and helplessness a mother shares with her child. The shared space of a hug differs when the body becomes a record of measure by which the child can see her own growth. In the sculpture, *Cut From the Same*, clothing offers a gauge that can visibly describe this difference and similarity.

My choice in materiality is based on the constant state of construction that a relationship is in. I am not interested in creating a slick veneer to hide what is underneath. The materials are the work. Both what is present and absent. The absence references the ever growing distance as a child, no longer in the womb, grows older, more independent, and with a greater autonomy. Nothing is hidden or forged. By repositioning the empathic maternal from the private, unseen space of the domestic to the public, display mode of the gallery, a subversive visibility of maternity is not offered to the public, but made public.

The saying “cut from the same cloth” has resonance with the work as pieces are cut out of the materials, vis-à-vis, the mother and the child. The language forming, appearing, being cut out, etc. in the performance, *How Do You Get Through Words*, originates in the inner dialog I have questioning my availability and decision-making processes with raising a daughter. Part diary, part letter, phrases intimate guilt and uncertainty as readers, both specific and general, absorb and relate to the work. Language acts as a symbol to represent the relationship between a (m)other and a child. The reciprocity of reading positions us as one who responds and one who responds to; analogous to that of mother to child. Like a seesaw, there is a reciprocal relationship to response.