

n. paradoxa international feminist art journal, volume 14, 2004

## Maternal Rites: Feminist Strategies

By Andrea Liss

When I first began my writing project on feminist art and experiences of and the maternal a few years ago, I had a discussion with a male academic colleague about an essay I was writing on motherhood and contemporary visual representation. He responded enthusiastically and suggested that there must be a great deal of work on this subject, adding **"I would think it would be natural."** I was dumbfounded and angered by his well-intended but Neanderthal remark that was laden with dangerously naive sexist assumptions. I regained my balance a little later and wished I had responded, **'What is natural is the repression.'**

Another incident of ignorance and assumption toward the reception of the concept of feminist motherhood yielded similar astonishment. I wanted to purchase the book, *Narrating Mothers: Theorising Maternal Subjectivities*. I was confident that I would find this important work at a liberal arts university bookstore whose critical studies section was especially good and whose manager was very conscientious. The book was not on the shelves for Critical Feminist Studies or Women's Studies. The manager's response when I inquired was a self-conscious, **"I thought it was too specialised."**

I will recount one more story, among the tellingly many I could relate, of speaking to a feminist colleague about my strategies for inviting women to speak about the falsities being a feminist mother in the classroom. **'Don't you think that risks reifying essentialism?'** was the insipid and underlyingly sexist response she gave me. **"No,"** I remember responding, **"I am scheming on my "mother" identity in order to bring out multiple, conflictive responses and encourage new ways of thinking."** This is perhaps the most shocking story to me because of her refusal as a feminist to acknowledge the dilemmas involved in formulating a burgeoning philosophy lived feminist motherhood.

These anecdotes from the late 1990s offer testimony to the difficulties in the representation of mothers, still caught in-between an ever-present ("**natural**") space and an insipid invisibility ("**too specific**" really meaning "**too personal**"). Such ingrained cultural perceptions beg the question as to whether representing and living feminist motherhood is a concerted reality or still a dream of the future. Despite the examples given above, or in spite of them, feminist art, feminist thinking and feminist scholarly reconsiderations of women's and mothers' material life experiences are in a promising state of reformulation. Earlier feminist activism from the 1960s highlighted the debilitating cultural stereotypes that

positioned women below men through such binary oppositions as powerful/submissive, active/passive and rigorous/soft. The figure of the father was the object of scrutiny within the field of feminist thinking that set out to displace the confines of patriarchy. The mother, however, remained a silent outcast for many feminists who strategically needed to distance themselves from all that was culturally coded as passive, weak and irrational, sometimes repudiating their own mothers. Feminists today no longer need to accommodate themselves to divisionist debates that create an either/or dogmatism between feminist and mother. Indeed, if the mother is no longer placed in opposition to feminism, that is, held in contempt of feminism, a redefined field of possibilities opens up to cultural theory, art history, art practice and the lived material experiences of women for rethinking the representation of motherhood as more than a sign of codified femininity or as a muted allegory.

If I point to uneasy alliances between feminism and motherhood -in highlighting above the mother's uncertain place within 1960s-1970s feminism and the disturbing account from the 1990s in which issues of the maternal were stifled because they were considered an embarrassment -it is because the relationships between feminism and motherhood are the crucial issues here. As the other two stories attest, the historical and cultural figure of the patriarchal mother continues to conjure up notions of her omnipresence while real mothers remain unacknowledged. Thus it is crucial to take into account that feminists did not give up motherhood in a wholesale fashion post-1968 but looked instead for ways to negotiate and refute polarised thinking that forbade the coexistence of feminism and motherhood. Even when important repudiations of the institution of motherhood were taking place, feminists did not stop becoming mothers or cease caring for or about children. But these distinctions were often difficult to live on a daily basis. Women made agonising choices about whether to mother or not, or to accept the impossibility of mothering for political, sexual, bodily or other reasons. One important aspect of being a feminist in the 1960s-1970s and which is still crucial today is to fulfill one's own desires and potentials to the fullest extent possible and to reject patriarchal limitations. To be a mother continues to mean temporarily losing that connection to one's self in order to give love and care to the new other, to the mystery, to the child. Sometimes these desires merge: more often they collide. What distinguishes the feminist mother 1960s to the present from the patriarchal model of the mother -the institution of motherhood -is that the feminist mother struggles to break the myth of the all-loving, all-forgiving and all-sacrificing mother. She still loves, forgives and sacrifices for her child(ren), but not at the expense of losing herself. It is not a matter of "*balancing motherhood and work*," as the media culture likes to insidiously simplify matters, as if we are really living in a "**post-feminist**" world. It is the feminist mother's admission that ambiguity is often the norm: for example, ambiguity between one's mother self and one's professional and sexual selves. Strategies of feminist motherhood in life and in visual culture displace traditional maternal qualities such as caring, empathy and sacrifice, not allowing them to be kept solely in the private realm, assigned to their "**proper place**".

Having lived through the political climate of the first George Bush administration and now undergoing the travesties created by the current George W. Bush folly reminds me of a telling event that trivialised mothers who step too far out of their assigned place. I am referring to the chocolate-chip cookie bake-off that Hilary Rodham Clinton was forced to participate in with then-First Lady Barbara Bush. Whether or not Rodham Clinton agreed to this public bake-off, the symbolism here is political coercion in which such acts of propaganda neutralise the diverse complexities of motherhood. When a mother is trivialised on such a large, symbolic scale in the name of patriotism, we can be sure that children, too, are the targets of such abuse. The Republican as well as the Democratic powers in the United States give lip service to caring about "**our children**", when the only children about whom they give a hoot come from families with money.

The artists that I discuss in this article -Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Ellen McMahon and Gail Rebhan -work in the context of North America, specifically the United States. They have made artwork that actively involves their children either as engaged subjects or as collaborative partners. Such respectful strategy with regard to their children challenges the disgraceful treatment of children, and mothers, in the United States. These three artists -Ukeles in her early work from the 1960s and 1970s, and McMahon and Rebhan from the 1980s and 1990s into the present -put into play provocative artistic and feminist strategies that confound traditional, limiting patriarchal misconceptions of the maternal. They have and are forging new models for the maternal in life and in visual culture, creating an exhilarating space for new becomings.

New York-based, internationally-recognised pioneer contemporary performance artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles is well known for her *Maintenance Art* collaborations with the New York City Department of Sanitation since the early 1970s and for her sustained dedication to environmental artwork in the present. Less well known, however, is that her earliest work dealt with the maintenance work involved in mothering. In fact, Ukeles' signature piece, *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance* (1973), an eight-hour performance at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut in which, among other activities, she washed the museum's front steps and discussed the status of the museum's custodians with unsuspecting museum visitors, came about (from her challenge for an institution to accept her invitation to do *Maintenance Art*. This challenge came in the form of a manifesto that was first published in excerpted form in *Ariforum* in 1969. This passionate manifesto stemmed from (one of Ukeles' most painful experiences as a developing, young woman artist. She was pregnant with her first child while she was going to art school and was dedicated to becoming a professional artist -that is, until her male mentor gave her advice he thought was helpful and self-evident. Right there in her sculpture class, he proclaimed, "**Well, Mierle, I guess you know you can't be an artist now.**" Looking back at this pivotal incident that occurred just before the birth of her first child in 1968, an incident that was sadly the norm for so many young women artists then, Ukeles's

deeply justifiable anger is still evident: **“Through free choice and love, I became pregnant. I had a child by choice. I was in an all-out crisis. There were no words for my life. I was split into two people, artist and mother. I was in a fury.”** Stunned, shocked and outraged, Ukeles was inspired to write her famous manifesto. She made clear the differences between the male avant-garde attitude toward art, which she characterised as **“The Death Instinct: separation, individuality...”** and her new Maintenance Art, that was inspired by **“The Life Instinct: unification, the eternal return, the perpetuation and maintenance of the species...”** In this manifesto Ukeles asked, with perfect aplomb, **“After the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?”**

The art world patriarchy tried to make Ukeles cut off part of herself in favor of the other. It was unthinkable for a woman to be an artist and a mother. She had a brilliant idea. Rather than give up, which was decidedly not an option, Ukeles wisely and outrageously took the matter-of-fact stance that her maternal work was the material from which art and cultural commentary could be made. Among these clever and far-reaching maternal works, I will discuss part of Ukeles' project *Maintenance Art Events: Fall Time Variations*, a work composed of three events that took place at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1974. The entirety of this long-duration performance installation piece pays homage to nature, reproduction, the passage of time, death, rebirth and memory. Several of Ukeles' other early artworks that address motherhood deal more directly with the physical aspects of maternal labour. In *Variations III: Children's Piece, Time Stop (Tree Droppings -The Leaving Home of the Leaves)*, the psychic work of the maternal is at issue. Ukeles chose three leaves that had fallen from a magnificent one-hundred-year-old oak tree on the Vassar campus. Each leaf was a different colour: burnt orange, golden yellow and gilded green, representing the beauty and change that occurs during Fall. These leaves also stood in as markers of her three children. Ukeles mingled earth from around the oak tree with each of these leaves. She then placed these organic materials in three different envelopes, adding to each a snippet of hair from each of her three children. Part of Ukeles' written 'Procedure' for the piece indicated that these envelopes would be maintained until her children left home. In rhythmic order, this written document stated that

**'Yael will be 18 in 1986  
Raquel will be 18 in 1988  
Meir will be 18 in 1996  
At which time the piece will be completed.  
What is severed and what grows BACK? NEW?'**

Talking about the piece years later, Ukeles said she was thinking about her children leaving her, as she did her mother. **“I think it's one of the hardest parts of being a mother, their leaving. The tree lets the leaves go. From the tree's point of view, it's good for the tree...Mothers can prevent their children from growing.”**

In addition to the fact that this piece unabashedly and poetically addressed maternal issues as early as 1974, it is also a feminist statement in its acceptance that children are individual human beings both connected to and distinct from their mothers. To make such a statement is an admission of love, a succumbing to difference and a difficult acceptance of the ambiguity of intimacy and distance within the mother- child bond. The ritual-like performance of the piece, as in the extreme care with which Ukeles prepared the soil and her children's hair to return to the earth and the calling out of her children's names, further weds this work to a quasi-religious ceremony merging death rites with the promise of the future.

Ukeles' mode of approach in *Variations III: Children s Piece, Time Stop* and in her other performance works was deeply conceptual, as was much of the art made by “**cutting- edge**” male artists during the 1970s. The profound difference, however, is that her subject matter confronted lived experience in a way that was deeply infused with generous humanistic concerns and makes known and takes into account that there exists an entire realm of maternal culture and that this culture counts.

It was only after Ukeles brought a feminist approach to working with her own motherhood that she turned to working with other groups of workers whose labour, like maternal work, she saw as culturally unacknowledged, if not despised. Working from a place of deep intersubjectivity through bodily connections with the New York City Department of Sanitation workers (shaking the hand of every single worker, following their steps in their daily labour), Ukeles has recently said that she “**came through these experiences as a mother.**”

Arizona-based artist Ellen McMahon's work on the maternal is characterised by a focus on the ironies and intimacies that result from the psychic and bodily dimensions of the charged relationships she has with her two daughters. She has also done research on maternal sacrifice and cultural perceptions about mothers who kill their children, as portrayed in literature, the media and real life. McMahon's diverse, on-going body of work includes small and large- scale drawings, mixed-media installations and performance. She began making art about cultural repression and the maternal a generation after Ukeles made her crucial refusal to submit to the limitations of the 1960s male artworld. McMahon's first piece addressing feminist motherhood was similarly generated by her clever response to confined, patriarchal thinking. McMahon began her fledgling art career as a faculty member in the Art Department at the University of Arizona, Tucson after a (non-paid) pregnancy leave that took place during the first semester of her employment. She thus faced a difficult beginning of her tenure-track at the university and the trials of having a three-week old baby and a three-year old child at home. At the first department meeting of the semester upon her return, the chair asked the faculty to write down all their accomplishments during the last year. McMahon was faced with the awful realization that she had no “**accomplishments**” to list that would be considered professional. No

exhibitions, no speaking engagements, no publications. Soon after this awkward meeting, McMahon decided that she would reinterpret this "**lack**" as fruitful production. The result was her poignant and powerful *No New Work* (1993). This artist's book is composed of eight palladium prints on tracing vellum and letterpress on paper made from her infant daughter's cloth diapers. The central image on each sheet pictures her daughter seen from the side, her face aglow, as if looking out from a window that she is touching. Above this imprint of her daughter are vertically printed texts and horizontal headings that alternate between "**Bonding Takes Time**" and "**No No No New Work**" and below the image different texts appear in linear fashion that contradict the text printed in circular design. Following the design just described, here are some of the texts:

vertical: **Bonding** across: **Takes Time**

below: **We push the fast track.**

circular: **Hear children and they will learn to listen.**

**Learn to listen. Listen.**

vertical: **No No No** across: **New Work**

below: **We push the fast track.**

circular: **Guide and care for them.**

below: **We abhor weakness.**

circular: **Advocate for those who need help. Help those of us in need.**

below: **We hear money.**

Circular: **Provide paid leave in times of personal crisis. Demand paid leave.**

The accusations in McMahon's texts, as in '**We push the fast track**' and the proposals for a different social approach, such as '**Guide and care for them**' recall some of Barbara Kruger's media-inspired text-and-image works. In McMahon's work, however, the plural 'we' is used. This perspective interestingly implicates the artist, as well as the viewer. The call for a more humane culture comes from a generalised imperative voice, '**Hear children and they will learn to listen. Learn to listen. Listen.**' The imperative voice thus seems distant, unidentified. The text in these lines is also printed in the smallest typeface of all of the text. But the circular design in which the calls to action are printed bring attention to themselves through this dynamic structure. McMahon's calls for a deeper sense of social and cultural justice are thus pronounced in a voice that resounds between demand and quietude, as if these wise directives are simply the way to act despite the difficulty to always do so. Similarly, the image of McMahon's daughter awakening goes beyond the singular mother's gaze, extending this visual emblem of the child into the future with hope and hesitation.

The maternal gaze in Gail Rebhan's photographs, video stills and mixed media work is a compelling assemblage of active and contemplative observations. In particular, in a series of work published in her book, *Mother-Son Talk: A dialogue between a mother and her young sons* (1996),<sup>7</sup> Rebhan conducts intimate yet distanced investigations of her two sons' domestic and social worlds through her visual study of their developing perceptions of these realms. Akin to Mary Kelly's pioneering *Post-Partum Document* (1973- 1979) made more than a generation

earlier, the objects Rebhan creates and the conversations with her boys that she records function as artifacts of and memorials to crucial psychic moments of the everyday. However, rather than Kelly's psychoanalytic focus on her son's early development and her poignant and often humorous responses to their interactions during the time that her son was under her maternal care, Rebhan's work begins when her sons leave the familial realm and, through school, enter the social world outside the home. As a feminist and the mother of two sons, she has been and continues to be especially concerned about and fascinated by how her boys respond to the often distorted cultural and social images they receive about gender and the representation of women. She also surveys their responses to race issues, and is attentive to the fact that they her boys have attended public school in Washington, D.C., where being Jewish is not the norm.

What is especially compelling to me about the work Rebhan makes based on issues of gender is that the form many of her art pieces take are in direct aesthetic relationship to the type of art media her boys are instructed to use in school as they progress through different grades. Other works from this project reproduce media images as the screen upon which her sons make sense of the world. Rebhan thus demonstrates that the boys' perceptions are already prefabricated in part through standardised forms of expression. Nonetheless, their own vivid and individual reception of knowledge about the world comes through. She then adds her own text to the boys' perceptions. Such is the case with *A tree, a house, a car (1991)*, xerograph in which her six-year-old son tells her and her husband that girls cannot grow up to be anything they want. As Rebhan's written text at the left side of the image recounts, **'I brace myself for a sexist comment. My husband and I exchange glances. Then my son says that's silly, girls can't grow up to be a tree, a house or a car.'** The absolute truth to the boy's beautiful logic is ironically emphasised by Rebhan's : reproduction of her son's drawings of a tree, a house and a car, below which are placed the corresponding nouns.

In *Pronouns* (1992), a photograph collaged on a xerograph, stories about the perception of gender continue with her younger son. Rebhan recounts that even at four years old, he had never used the female pronoun, although he could distinguish between boys and girls. She writes, **"It drove me crazy. Mommy is reading his book. ..."** This pronoun problem unexpectedly changed when both boys were watching two woman wrestlers/actresses on television, a ludicrous image that Rebhan reproduces in this piece. Her son yells, **"They're HER wrestlers!"** Below the image of these two women, Rebhan's text coyly states, **"Ever since then my son uses pronouns correctly."**

I am drawn to the humour and irony in this series of Rebhan's work, which is formulated through the way she positions herself as an active player in her encounters with her sons and her amusing anticipation of sexist attitudes from them. Seemingly self-evident, these works reveal the deep mysteries and infinite subtleties of children's, and in this case her sons' developing perceptions of the

world. They also importantly give testimony to the shifting textures of Rebhan's maternal realizations.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Ellen McMahon and Gail Rebhan each evoke in their work rhetorical, autobiographical, cultural and ultimately, political stances in order to bring home, as it were, the connections and poignant contradictions among social clichés, lived maternal experiences and their reconceived visual representations of feminist motherhood. In so doing, they are making irrefutable the existence of a varied and strong maternal culture in the visual arts.

Dr. Andrea Liss is the Contemporary Art Historian/ Cultural Theorist at California State University San Marcos. Her books include: *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography and the Holocaust* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998) and *Bodies of Knowledge: Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming).

### **Notes**

1. This book is edited by Brenda S. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).
2. See *n. paradoxa, (Eco)Logical*, volume 9 (Jan 2002).
3. Interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles, May 19, 2000.
4. *ibid.*
5. Interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles, May 20, 2002. 6. *ibid.*
7. This book was produced during a residency at the Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, New York.
8. Further evidence of the importance of the maternal in the visual arts is evidenced by the recent exhibition *Maternal Metaphors*, curated by artist Myrel Chernick, Rochester Contemporary, Rochester, N.Y., April 30-May 23, 2004. The exhibition catalogue includes essays by Myrel Chernick, Moyra Davey, Rachel Hall, Jennie Klein, Karen van Meenen and myself.