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## **Mother Art** ***Feminism, Art and Activism***

The public perception of white feminism is that it was antimother, antiman, antimarriage, and procareer and focused on abortion rather than childbirth.

—Rosalyn Baxandall, (2001: 239)

It's interesting to me that most books on the women's liberation movement neglect the early feminist day-care efforts. Is one reason the resistance of women like me to being stigmatized as mothers?

—Rosalyn Baxandall (1998: 218)

Several factors are responsible for the characterization of the women's movement of the 1970s as anti-motherhood. To many people, this position seemed to follow from the rejection of patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality and from efforts to legalize abortion and legitimize careers for women. More recent analyses of the women's movement have solidified this interpretation. The most vocal proponent of this viewpoint, Sylvia Ann Hewlett, has consistently blamed feminism for failing to address motherhood (Hewlett 1986, 1991, 2002). However, as the above quotes from Rosalyn Baxandall, an activist in and a scholar of second wave feminism, indicate, the relationship between feminism and motherhood is a complex one. While Baxandall herself was a committed feminist activist, her ambivalence about the role of "mother" comes through in the latter quote. While Lauri Umansky's excellent book, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* (1996) analyzed feminist discourse about motherhood, this paper argues that what feminists did is as important as what they said about motherhood. I focus on the activities of one group, Mother Art, active from 1974 to 1986, to explore the ways that grassroots feminists

combined motherhood and activism. By embracing the radical feminist slogan “the personal is political,” the members of Mother Art collapsed the distinction between the private world of motherhood and public realm of activism to create art works that brought their perspective as mothers to feminist causes.

The first members of Mother Art, Christy Kruse, Helen Million, Laura Silagi, and Suzanne Siegel, met as students in the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW), an alternative feminist art school located in the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles California.<sup>1</sup> The Woman’s Building, founded in 1973 and closed in 1991, was a center for women’s culture that grew out of the first experiments in feminist art education. While training in the FSW focused on helping women to locate their own voices and to express this in the content of their art, members of Mother Art initially felt that motherhood was not recognized. Mother Art member Suzanne Siegel (1992) remembered dogs were allowed in individual artist’s studios, but not children. Siegel recalled that when one of her friends brought her daughter to the Woman’s Building so that she could view art made by women, the gallery attendant cautioned the mother not to let the little girl touch anything. The Woman’s Building was supposed “to be an open space for everyone,” yet Siegel remembered, there was “this immediate kind of negative response that ... [women] felt as mothers.” To make the Woman’s Building more hospitable for children, in 1974 Mother Art created the Rainbow Playground. Laura Silagi (2002) saw the Rainbow Playground as “a way of asserting that the ideal of feminism needed to include childcare and a place for children, because children are part of society and women’s lives and that you can’t really divorce that fact from being a woman, being a feminist and being an artist.”

The members of Mother Art also worked to counter the idea that a woman could not be both an artist and a mother. As Siegel recalled, “[a]lthough it seems strange today, at the beginning of the Women’s Movement in the early seventies some feminists considered being both a serious artist and mother to be in conflict” (Mother Art, 2000). Thus, Mother Art curated two art exhibitions, *By Mothers* in 1975 and 1976, at the Woman’s Building. The announcement for the second *By Mothers* show expressed Mother Art’s commitment “to taking the private, personal aspects of the traditional female experience of nurturing and making it the valid content for our public art” (Mother Art, c. 1976). Members of Mother Art also hoped that *By Mothers* would offer a more complex depiction of motherhood by exploring “the pain anxiety, anger and guilt of mothers” in addition to “the delight, the strength, the care in nurturing” (Mother Art, c. 1976). As part of the first exhibition, Mother Art organized a month-long series of events for mothers and their children in order to reach out to “a part of the community we felt had been neglected” at the Woman’s Building (Siegel, 1992). While many of the pieces in *By Mothers* included images of mothers and children, they differed dramatically from the sentimental portraits common to art history. In describing the images, Silagi (2002) characterized them as “grotesque, not sentimental ...

ironic ... opposed to anything romanticized ... .humorous, although some of them are very sweet.”

For example, Gloria Hadjuk, who joined Mother Art in 1976, created *Application For Prospective Mothers* (1976), which de-romanticize motherhood by posing a series of 30 questions to prospective mothers. Some questions emphasized the life-altering aspects of motherhood, such as “are you aware that the decision to have a child is virtually irreversible?” Other queries focused on the lack of control women have over the experience of motherhood, such as “are you willing to forego a full night’s sleep for however long your baby(s) determine?” Some inquiries were humorously tongue in cheek, like “Are you willing to instruct, repeat, answer questions, repeat, read bedtime stories, repeat and repeat?” while “do you have sufficient motivation to learn and grow so that your child will have a solid role model to follow?” and “Are you secure enough in your personhood so as to establish the security of your child?” are frankly poignant. Hadjuk created 15 illustrations for the various questions on her application. Hadjuk interspersed her own personal experiences of motherhood, with analyses of the institution, such as Erich Neumann’s *The Great Mother* (1995), which she used to create collages. For example, for the image associated with the question “I would like to experience pregnancy” she overlaid an acetate image of her pregnant body on the text of her journal in which she considered becoming pregnant. Hadjuk does not posit her experience of motherhood as that of all women. She noted that “these questions are based on my knowledge and experience, and in no way represent a comprehensive list.” Nor does she assume that only women might ponder parenthood. She stated “I would be most interested in seeing the counterpart application by a male artist/father.” Rather, *Application for Potential Mothers* is designed to raise consciousness and invite dialogue about motherhood.

As Mother Art developed as a group, the members began contemplating ways to broaden the public’s understanding of the role of mothers. Siegel recalled, “[w]e were interested in the work women do in the home that is not acknowledged. We wanted to put that private activity into public space” (Mother Art, 2000). In addition, the members of Mother Art wanted to offer “the public contemporary artistic experiences usually accessible only to those who frequent galleries and museums” (Mother Art, c. 1977). As Hadjuk explained “we can create art from our everyday lives with everyday materials” (qtd. in Alexander-Leitz, 1979: 20). Therefore, in 1976 Helen Million wrote a proposal to the California Arts Council for a \$700 grant to fund Mother Art performances in laundromats, which the members of Mother Art viewed as “one of the major extensions of woman’s role in the community” (Mother Art, c 1977).

*Laundryworks* (Mother Art, c 1977) involved a performance timed to a wash and dry cycle and a pamphlet in English and Spanish that explained the project. In *Laundryworks*, the members of Mother Art entered the laundromat, put an item in to wash, strung a clothesline across the room and hung individual

artworks from it. Gloria Hadjuk's piece played with the parallel notions between the wash cycle and life cycles. Suzanne Siegel created a xerox series that transitioned from a clear image to one almost completely faded, equating colors fading in the laundry and the invisibility of women's work. Helen Million's photographs of women doing laundry and of the actual items laundered juxtaposed an "inner and outer world" (Mother Art, c. 1977). Laura Silagi created an ironic image of washing photos of water. Velene Campbell-Keslar, who joined Mother Art in 1976, created random poems composed with words silk-screened on to pillowcases.

While the task of cleaning clothing might be mundane, the members of Mother Art sought to alter perceptions of this experience. As the members of Mother Art explained in the introduction to the *Laundryworks* pamphlet: "[w]e are interested in transforming the tedium and drudgery of the work by providing fresh visions in an effort to bring about an awareness of ourselves as human beings sharing a common task with the community" (Mother Art, c. 1977). In an effort to create dialogue among the community of laundromat patrons, the *Laundryworks* pamphlet posed 12 questions about the experience of doing laundry. Some questions pondered the more profound aspects of this everyday chore, such as "what in your life could the different cycles of a washing machine (soak-wash-rinse-spin-dry) be compared to?" (Mother Art, c. 1977). Other questions were humorous such as "when you look inside of a machine before putting in your clothes, what do you expect to find?" and "do you ever have the urge to put an obnoxious child through a short rinse cycle?" (Mother Art, c. 1977).

*Laundryworks* and Mother Art became a *cause celebre* in 1978 during debates in Los Angeles over Proposition 13, a ballot proposition to reduce property taxes. The *Los Angeles Times* cited the funds given by the California Arts Council to Mother Art as an example of wasteful government spending (Rodd, 1978). Ronald Reagan, then working as a talk show host between his stint as governor of California and his election to the presidency, repeated the *Los Angeles Times*' dismissal of *Laundryworks* as an effort to bring culture to housewives by staging plays in laundromats (Reagan, 1978). Members of Mother Art were angered particularly by the implication that women doing laundry did not deserve or need exposure to culture. As Deborah Krall (2002) recalled "[t]his was one of the first attacks on government support of the arts. Mother Art responded by organizing with other Los Angeles artists to protest cuts, but the controversy continues today in terms of NEA funding" (2000). In response, Mother Art helped to organize Art for Public Consumption, a dialogue and potluck dinner that brought public officials and artists together to discuss government cuts to arts funding. Approximately 300 people attended, including the aide to a local city council member (Hadjuk, 1978).

While Mother Art's early artwork focused on making the personal political, Mother Art now aimed its artwork at the traditionally political arena. In two performance pieces, *Mother Art Cleans Up the Banks* and *Mother Art*

*Cleans Up City Hall* (Mother Art, 1978), Mother Art attacked the sites they saw as the real locations of government waste. Playing off “both a verbal and a visual pun about the role of women as purifiers and domestic sanitation workers of the work,” Mother Art “cleaned” these sites with brooms, mops and dusters (Mother Art, 1978). As Siegel explained “[t]he large institutions in this country are still dominated by males ... [a]nd they make decision affecting millions of women without giving women a voice in the process” (Hathaway, 1978: 41). An installation based on *Mother Art Cleans Up the Banks* and *Mother Art Cleans Up City Hall* appeared at California State University Los Angeles Gallery and in the window of an appliance store in Santa Monica, California. The installation consisted of life-size blowups of Mother Art engaging in household chores, accompanied by statements of the skills and values Mother Art members developed from their experience as mothers that they thought needed to be included in public life. For example, Gloria Hadjuk’s statement about things “the experience of being a parent has given me” included “a clue that threats, bluffs, bribes and blackmail can backfire” and “a lesson in power struggle.” (Hadjuk, 1979).

In 1978, Mother Art began a series of art works addressing abortion. Deborah Krall (2002) recalled the impetus to address abortion: “We felt that there was a generation of younger women who had come of age never experiencing abortion being illegal and that they were forgetting about it. We felt a need to remind them of what that was like so they would feel a sense of urgency about fighting to keep abortion legal.” *Not Even If It’s You*, performed at the Church on Ocean Park in November 1981, began with the shadow of a pregnant woman standing behind a scrim as a woman outlines her silhouette and draws a fetus within the abdomen. A woman dressed in a man’s suit comes on stage and stencils the words “government property” across the outline. As the lights go out, the members of Mother Art began chanting “No legal abortion, not even in the case of rape, not even in the case of incest, not even when the woman will die, not even when it’s a child who is pregnant, not even when the fetus cannot survive, not even when the fetus is defective” (1982). The Suit and the Pregnant Woman carried a naked corpse on stage. A tape narrated the true story of the corpse’s illegal abortion, which cost her life. Slides illustrating her story interspersed with abortion facts appeared on a screen during her narrative. The performance ended with the suit and the pregnant woman repeating the chant.

As with *Laundryworks*, Mother Art developed an installation based on *Not Even If It’s You* (1982). While a tape of women recounting their illegal abortions played, viewers at *The Museum of Illegal Abortions* (November 1981) viewed implements women had used over the centuries to induce abortions, as well as a timeline of efforts to legalize abortion. Silagi (2002) recalled: “we allowed people to come in to this space one at a time and they could listen to these stories. It was very personal for them because they were alone with these stories.” At a second installation, *Liberty of Choice*, members of Mother Art

dressed as the Statue of Liberty. One member posed as a corpse under a bloody sheet, surrounded by the museum artifacts. In the background tapes played the stories of women's experiences with abortion, as well as some men telling about their involvement with their girlfriends' illegal abortions.

The fight against abortion represents resistance to society's effort to cast all women into the role of mother. Although the members of Mother Art wanted to celebrate women's role as mothers and believed that the culture should value women's work as mothers, they never argued that all women should be mothers. Members of Mother Art saw efforts to restrict abortion as yet another way society attempted to control women's experience of motherhood, and used their art to draw attention to these efforts. As Laura Silagi (2002) explained:

We decided that we wanted to deal with issues that effect women... [C]hoosing whether you are going to have a child was very important to us. Some of the women in Mother Art had abortions, but also it was just an issue for women. We wanted to expand what we did to deal with political issues, not just domesticity per se, but things that affect women in various ways.

During the early 1980s, members of Mother Art addressed a variety of political issues, including the threat of nuclear war, homelessness, and Central American refugees. In *L. A. Guernica* (1982) Mother Art took Picasso's famous mural and recreated it as an image of Los Angeles devastated by nuclear war. For *Homeless Women* (1984) Laura Silagi and Suzanne Siegel created an installation that told the stories of homeless women in Los Angeles alongside pictures of the women. *Flowers for Four Women—Flores para Cuatro Mujeres* (1984) and *Gloria* (1984) explored the lives of Central American refugee women in Los Angeles. Although these art works addressed different political concerns, the approach was the same: "issues were personalized by incorporating women's oral histories into installations and performances, which included photographs, assemblage, sound and text" (Mother Art, 2000).

In 1985, Mother Art once more turned to the topic of motherhood because, as Laura Silagi (2002) recalled, "[w]e were interested in doing something that was more positive about women being activists." *The Dining Room Table* commemorated the founding in March of 1967 of Another Mother for Peace at the dining room table of Barbara Avedon, a television screenwriter and political activist. Another Mother for Peace sought to end the war in Vietnam through a variety of strategies. The organization coined the slogan "war is unhealthy for children and other living things," organized a consumer boycott and worked to elect anti-war candidates. Laura Silagi's son knew Barbara Avedon's son and as Deborah Krall (2002) explained, "[w]e loved the idea of her working from her dining room table. Women could be powerful from within the home." The installation of *The Dining Room Table*, which

occurred in several venues, mixed images of domesticity, such as toys and coffee cups, with the tools of political activism, like a typewriter and letters to politicians. In one incarnation, the installation also included Barbara Avedon's recollections about the founding of the organization.

Although the members of Mother Art officially stopped collaborating in 1986, Deborah Krall, Suzanne Siegel and Laura Silagi once again joined forces in 2000 to mount a Mother Art retrospective exhibition that documented the group's 14-year history. As part of this retrospective, the three women created one final Mother Art piece, *Running Out Of Time*. Utilizing the strategies developed in previous artworks, Mother Art addressed the dichotomies of middle age. In *Running Out Of Time* many pairs of shoes, which represent the steps in women's lives, surrounded a clock that read "mid life". Inside shoes words described members reactions to middle age, such as "useful" and "weary," "happy" and "depressed," and "experienced" and "wise." *Running Out of Time* was a quintessential Mother Art Project, as Laura Silagi (2002) explained: "basically we [Mother Art] are part of our times. We tried to deal with issues of our times ... so we decided to deal with the dichotomy or ironies different facets of being older."

First we clean up the world and then we take it over.  
(Mother Art, 1980)

As the above quote reflects, the strength and power of Mother Art derived both from the members' role as mothers and their collective action. While it has become commonplace to dismiss second wave feminism as hostile to mothers and motherhood, the example of Mother Art illustrates the ways in which mothers combined activism and art to offer feminist perspectives. While critics have pointed to the essentializing of motherhood as one of the factors that contributed to the rise of cultural feminism and the decline of radical feminism in the early 1970s, the activism of Mother Art stands in stark contrast to this judgment (Echols, 1989). Although Mother Art insisted that the women's movement make room for mothers, they saw motherhood as part of their identity as feminists and connected to multiple feminist issues. As their activism on behalf of women's work, abortion, nuclear war, homelessness, and refugee women testifies, the members of Mother Art embodied the ideal that "the personal is political." And members of Mother Art were only one group among many in the women's movement that worked to transform both the experience and institution of motherhood. Because the true impact of the second wave of feminism lays in the radical changes it wrought in the every day lives of women, more specific studies of grassroots activism are needed to fully understanding of the role of motherhood in the women's movement.

<sup>1</sup>Although the members of Mother Art were all Euro-American, it would be

inaccurate to depict the group as homogenous. Mother Art included single, married and divorced mothers. Some mothers identified as lesbians. Some mothers had their children young and other mothers were “older” when they gave birth. Members’ children ranged in age from toddlers to fully-grown.

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