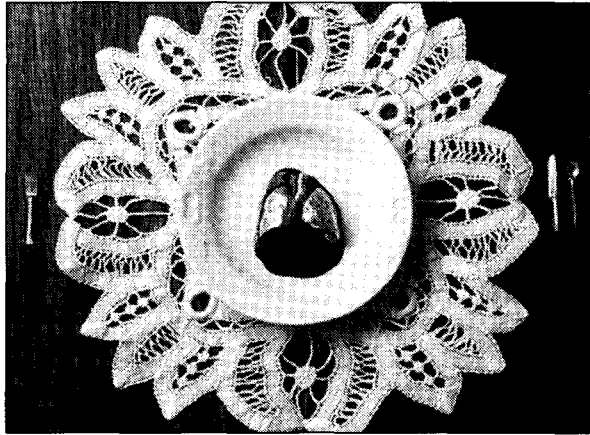


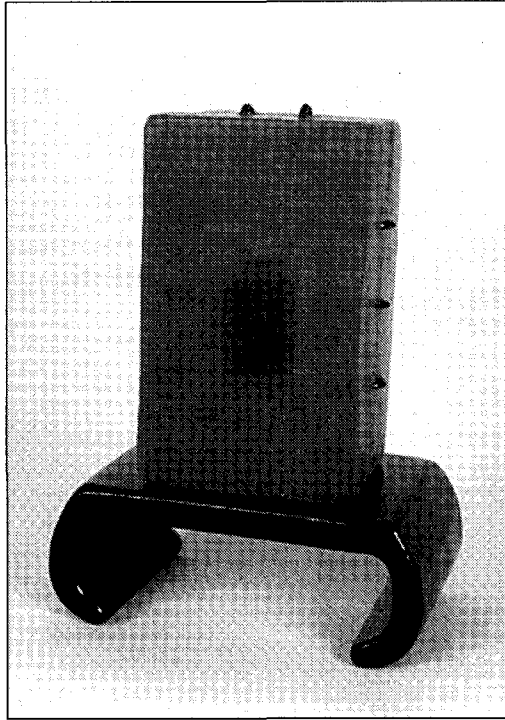
## Maternal Exposure



*"The Uterus and its Appurtenances," from behind, 1990 (detail).  
Oak table, porcelain dishes, cast silver, lace, blood.  
4" diameter dish. Photo: Monica Bock*

### I.

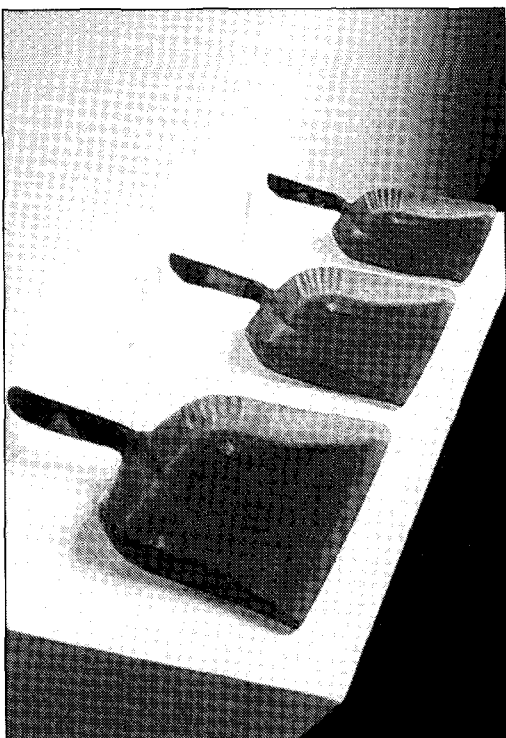
Well before I had actually given birth, my first major body of artwork—as a graduate student at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago—was about birth. Thinking about family in the context of the debate over abortion, I produced a series of mixed media objects that became an installation for my 1990 MFA exhibition. The centerpiece of the installation, a round oak table set with four miniature place settings, was called “The Uterus and Its Appurtenances from Behind.” With language and anatomical imagery lifted from my mother’s anatomy texts, the piece was built on memories of her struggle between work and family. Doll plates laid with miniature cast sterling internal organs suggested the personal toll behind decorous housekeeping, as well as the reality of life consumed in life. The piece came out of knowing that, like my mother, my unavoidable need for my own work was coupled with a desire to birth and raise children, that I would soon be negotiating the same treacherous territory between intimacy and autonomy that she had, and that I would be equally torn and driven about it.



*"Shadow Wrestling," 1994 .  
Mahogany, glycerin soap  
bars, blued steel staples, glass  
bottle, gold foil, wax, blood,  
amoxicillin. 4.5" x 3.25" x 2"  
Photo: Monica Bock*

## II.

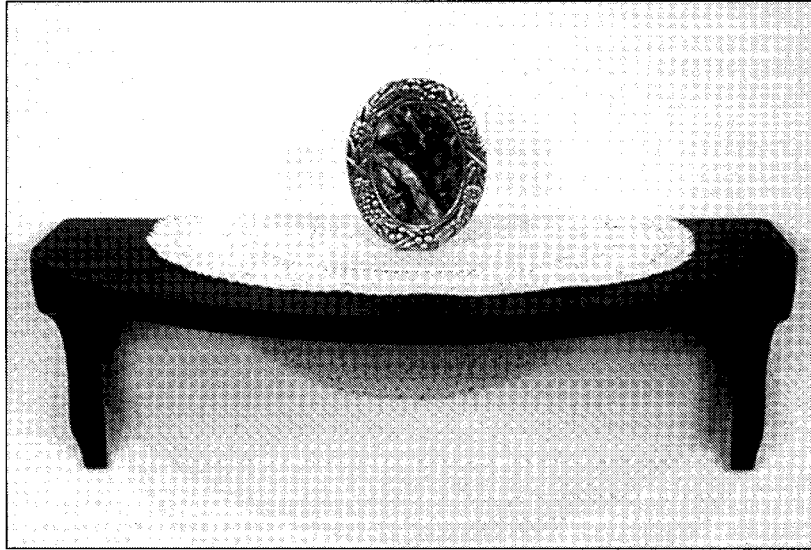
In 1993, I gave birth to my daughter at home, and shortly thereafter, made a small piece called *Shadow Wrestling*, using two bars of glycerin soap resting on end, face to face on a reliquary stand. Stapled together, the bars encased a small vial of my own blood. Originally based on a Theresa of Avila quote about “wrestling with the shadow of death,” the piece marked my first use of glycerin as a reference to flesh and its vulnerability, and offered itself as a contemplation of the impermanence that’s felt specifically in looking at one’s children. My understanding of the piece clarified well after it was made, when I received a poem written for it by Zofia Burr, a writer and professor of English at George Mason University. We met in 1995, when we were both living in Chicago, and we started a conversation that gradually turned into an artistic collaboration. Our collaboration has lately focused on how the roles of mother and of not-mother are part of the same impossible set of expectations confronting women who choose to be defined by both work and nurturing. In regard to “the maternal body,” no woman gets to define herself completely outside the terms of good mother/ bad mother – the terms of what it means to take on, tamper with or reject the role of the mother as cultural institution.



*"Afterbirth (Sac Fluid Cord),"*  
1998. Cast glycerin, glass  
bottles, amniotic sac, amniotic  
fluid, umbilical cord,  
amoxicillin.  
5" x 42" x 14"  
Photo: Monica Bock

### III.

Since 1996, when I more or less simultaneously became a full time mother and a full time professor of art, my creative research has responded to tensions between intimacy and autonomy, nurturing and productivity, family and work. My art has become a means of publicly negotiating the terms of motherhood as personal experience, social identity and cultural institution. Early in my tenure process, and with the example of other mothering artists in academia, I realized that my family life would not be recognized as pertinent to my work. So, it became imperative to make art with and about my children, in order to make our reality known, but also to stay close to them even though half the time it's the work that preempts my actually being with them. I keep choosing this kind of complex and conflicted nurturing with reflection upon nurturing, this kind of looking and public revelation of my looking even at what may be considered un-motherly to look at. In the summer of 1998, I created a mixed media piece called *Afterbirth (Sac Fluid Cord)* in which three cast glycerin dustpans rest on a shelf with a glass bottle encased in each of their handles. The first bottle carries a bit of amniotic sac, the next amniotic fluid, and the last umbilical cord - my own children's birth matter that I was able to collect and preserve. The piece triggered the conception of a number of objects and installations linked by the concept of exposing aspects of family life, life after birth as it were.



*"Afterbirth: Postpartum Miniature," 1999.  
Oak shelf, antique doily, gold plated cast sterling frame, photograph.  
3.75" x 6.5" x 3.5" Photo: Monica Bock*

#### IV.

In *Afterbirth: Postpartum Miniature*, a tiny print of a photograph displayed in a gold plated silver frame rests on a doily on a small shelf. The image is of my son's placenta kept frozen since his birth in 1995. The "portrait" reflects my effort to preserve the experience of labor and the memory of new birth, but it also calls attention to the power of the placenta itself. Interestingly, more than the actual birth material included in for example *Afterbirth (Sac Fluid Cord)*, this photograph and the word "afterbirth" itself have elicited discomfort and even outrage from some viewers. Aesthetically composed as this photograph is, I understand the image pushes sanitized notions of birth. For me, it represents my son, but it also represents my ownership of the pregnancy and birth process. I own and know this placenta because of my children's home births. Perhaps because of the apparent persistence and ease of disseminating textual and photographic evocations of the body, or because of the sheer power of naming, the word and the image in combination are taken as more dangerous than the vulnerable material itself.



*"Maternal Exposure  
(or, don't forget  
the lunches)"  
1999-2000 (detail).  
Embossed and  
folded sheet lead and  
cast glycerin bags.  
Bags each approx.  
11" x 5" x 3"  
Photo: Monica Bock*

## V.

*Maternal Exposure (don't forget the lunches)* is inspired by the daily ritual of exposing one's children and one's nurturing skills to public scrutiny. The piece consists of 418 lead sheet bags embossed with the daily menus of school and day camp lunches I prepared for my two young children over the course of the year from January 6 to December 23, 1999. The lead bags gather in rows, spreading across the floor in the order the original lunches were prepared. Inserted intermittently, small lead sheet plaques replace lunch bags and announce the days when no lunches were needed—sick days, snow days, holidays. As flesh-like counter-parts to the protective yet poisonous lead bags, an equal number of cast glycerin soap bags accumulate randomly behind the lead bags. Zofia Burr contributes collaboratively to the piece with a series of poems (or poem fragments) written in her own hand on the walls surrounding the lunch bags (see page 55).

At a recent opening of the installation in Boston, a viewer related that because of the demands of their mothering, a group of artist mothers he knew was unable to get together a planned show on the difficulties of being mothers and artists. He felt the ambitious scale and solidity of the lunch bag installation asserted the accomplishment of the artist despite her motherhood, in contrast to the poem's observation that *a mother is supposed to allow the time to keep nothing of her gift*. I couldn't tell whether he understood that contrast to be precisely the crux of the maternal dilemma, or whether he believed somehow that "good" mothers don't have time to reflect on what they do, much less present art about it. Every minute of every day a mother makes an emotionally fraught choice between autonomy and intimacy, and every adult who reacts to this work carries stories of their own about those choices. What is disquieting for some is the critical distance on mothering by the mother herself. And it's a risk of a certain kind to bring ambivalence forward as the condition of one's mothering and one's work.

**Dedication**

This is for the bad mother in me I love  
wanting to be kept. For  
the Bad mother I love — wanting

(My mother said)

If you plan to run away, let me know and I'll pack you a lunch,  
if you want to run away, let me know and I'll pack your bag.

Just be sure  
to send us a postcard.  
Just be sure to let me know.

The lunch bag is loaded. With coming from home that is her  
carried into the world. That you are returning to. Regarded.  
And what is spoken in the lunch packed and eaten,  
rejected or thrown away, every day a mother is supposed  
to allow the time to keep nothing of.

Nothing of what you are  
returning  
to loved.  
Nothing of what you are returning.

A mother is supposed to allow the time to keep nothing of her  
Gift. No return returned. Mother made—made mother—  
no more days off from the world.  
Designed against time.  
To be saved Someone is of you on you  
with you you are for.  
Warned.

A mother is supposed to allow the time  
a mother is supposed to allow the time to keep  
a mother is supposed to allow the time to keep nothing  
a mother is supposed to allow the time to keep nothing of her  
a mother is supposed to allow the time to keep nothing of her gift

She was nurturing, and violent. She wanted.

The lunch Bag is loaded. With coming from her.

—Zofia Burr