

Ultimately this is a book that addresses a fundamental dilemma: how to carve out an intellectual life—which appears to require a certain ascetic sensibility—from within the midst of an active family life. Ironically, Dickson’s third pregnancy and the creation of new life are catalysts for intellectual dis-

## Feminist Art and the Maternal

Andrea Liss

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

### Reviewed by Rachel Epp Buller

It will come as no surprise to readers of this journal that motherhood and the maternal body for years fell short of serious consideration in feminist art and art history. Perhaps because artists and historians alike viewed the themes as sentimental or the role of motherhood as constricting, prior to the 1990s only Mary Kelly and a small handful of other artists successfully bridged art and motherhood to critical acclaim. Andrea Liss’s book, then, is a welcome and high-quality contribution to a recently burgeoning field, primarily for the ways in which it expands the discussion of art and the maternal. Liss not only re-examines bodies of work by well-known mother-artists and highlights the work of lesser-known artists, she also challenges stereotypes of maternal sentimentality by exploring themes of trauma, loss, and sensuality, and broadens the scope of the discussion to include art that addresses “maternal care,” the invisible domestic labour so often performed by women and mothers.

As an opening, Liss presents an extensive and elegant re-reading of Mary Kelly’s famous *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79). Her positioning of Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s “maintenance art” as maternal, while initially surprising, is well argued and greatly enriches the term. Liss’s best chapter, “Mamas Out of Place,” details work that pushes against the boundaries of maternal conventions, bringing much-deserved attention to a number of artists along the way. Ellen McMahon’s extraordinary artist’s book, *No New Work* (1993), for example, directly responds to the academic repression of her double identities as artist/faculty and mother, while Judith Hopkins’s 1994 activist project, *Stretching It: Surviving on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children)*, chronicles the degradation of mothers who seek governmental assistance yet refuse victim status, giving voice to “maternal acts that defy passivity and enforced poverty” (83). Photographer Gail Rebhan explores her sons’ experiences of learning about gender and race, and Los Angeles artist collective M.A.M.A. (Mother Artists Making Art) intervenes in public spaces to bring attention to the cultural politicization of breastfeeding.

While most of the chapters work together to build a cohesive whole, the chapter on filmmaker Ngozi Onwurah struggles to fit in. The disjuncture between still and filmic representations seems marked here, and the verbal descriptions of scenes from the film prove difficult to follow or visualize.

A unique strength of the book is the way in which Liss weaves personal narrative into scholarly prose. The short “interlude” on the maternal care given by her ten-year-old son during her battle with breast cancer is particularly compelling. The transitions between the two voices are not always seamless, but this blend of the personal and the political, so to speak, will make her art historical discussions accessible even to lay readers.

## **In the Other Room: Entering the Culture of Motherhood**

Fiona Nelson.

Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2009.

### **Reviewed by Sonja Boon**

Fiona Nelson begins this new book on mothering by referencing the insights of noted writer Ursula LeGuin, who argues evocatively for an understanding of sexual difference that celebrates women’s unique experiences, understandings, and ways of knowing within a broader patriarchal culture that historically has devalued women. This, too, is the nature of Nelson’s work: her “other room” is the cultural space of the new mother who struggles to articulate and claim a maternal identity within a broader social environment that still does not fully value the act of mothering.

Nelson’s study, undertaken in the early 2000s, involved in-depth interviews with 53 Alberta-based mothers, all of whom were either pregnant or relatively new mothers; novitiates, in other words, in the “mommy club.” Central to her work is the desire to explore and map what she terms the culture of motherhood: the symbols, rituals, stories, norms, values, and initiation rites that mark the cultural space of the mother. Significantly, these characteristics are not externally-defined, but rather, self-defined: articulated and experienced by mothers themselves in a process of meaning-making that Nelson considers essential to shaping mothers’ conceptual identities. Indeed, Nelson’s work suggests that the culture of motherhood is a necessary space for affirmation and celebration and integral to women’s understandings of themselves as mothers. At the same time, however, her research also illustrates tensions, fractures, and exclusions. While Nelson’s interviewees were able to identify the parameters of the culture of motherhood, less than half claimed this culture as a “room of their own” (98). Mothers reported judgement, stigmatization, and conflict on a variety of issues. Such tensions demonstrate that even