

Francine Krause

Reconnecting Women to the Motherlines through the Practice of Pregnancy Belly Masking

In the early 1990s, academic feminists concerned with essentialism were skeptical of an excessive focus on motherhood and the pregnant body, yet in popular culture, the pregnant body was being galvanized as a symbol of female empowerment. At that time, Naomi Lowinsky also introduced her concept of the “motherlines,” calling for women to regain a sense an embodied connection to the stories of their lifecycles and maternal lineage. Interpreting the motherlines in a nonessentialist way, I introduce Californian artist Francine Krause’s 1991 “In Honor of Pregnant Women” exhibition of belly masks (i.e., plaster casts of the pregnant torso) as an example of a cultural practice working toward reconnecting women to the motherlines through the language of visual art. Krause’s exhibition provided a forum through which everyday women’s stories and feelings about pregnancy could be publicly transmitted; it called attention to women’s entry into, and complex relationship with, the “mask of motherhood.” Krause’s exhibition was also an important way for women to mediate their complex feelings about pregnancy, which allowed the audience to question established cultural discourses about pregnancy as well as consider their own connection to the motherlines.

Until the early 1990s displaying pregnant bellies was taboo in mainstream Western culture; pregnant women were expected to hide their bumps under conservative maternity fashion. Academic feminists, concerned with biological essentialism—that physiological traits, especially in regards to reproduction, could be used to justify social inequities between men and women (DiQuinzio 2)—had also been by and large skeptical of an excessive focus on motherhood and the pregnant body. Thus while many feminist texts on the female body were released from the late 1970s to late 1980s, references to pregnancy were routinely omitted (Matthews and Wexler 9). Yet a counterculture had begun;

in 1987, Rosalind Petchesky questioned the fetal imagery used in prolife campaigns, and argued that pregnant mother's bodies and stories must be made visible and contextualised, so as not to remove the mother from the picture (8). In 1992, Naomi Ruth Lowinsky introduced the concept of the "motherlines," calling for women to regain a sense an embodied connection to the stories of their lifecycles and maternal lineage: "We are so full of judgements about what mother ought to be that we can barely see what mother is. This has been shattering to a woman's sense of self and her connection to roots" ("Introduction" xi). As this paper demonstrates, in popular culture the image of the pregnant body was galvanized in ways challenging established feminist and cultural discourses of pregnancy (and maternity) as both invisible and disempowered.

Whereas work to date has primarily focused on exploring women's connection to the motherlines through personal interviews (Green), oral histories (The Motherline Story Project), and literature (O'Reilly, "A Politics"), Lowinsky's work makes clear that both visual imagery and tactile experiences with artworks can also connect women to the motherlines ("Mother of Mothers" 227). In this article, I explore the prospect of healing women's connection to the motherlines through art by introducing a 1991 visual art exhibition of pregnancy belly casts—plaster molds of the pregnant torso—conceived and curated by Californian artist Francine Krause in which everyday mothers were given an opportunity to display their self-decorated belly masks. This paper seeks to contribute to recent literature that has uncovered and celebrated professional artists who have taken the maternal as their subject (Chernick and Klein; Buller; Betterton; Liss). It also explores the use of art by everyday women during pregnancy, a subject that has largely fallen outside the scope of this literature.

As Andrea O'Reilly suggests, women become disconnected from their motherlines by negative cultural practices including, "the devaluation of motherhood and the reinforcement of maternal powerlessness, mother-blame and matrophobia" ("Across the Divide" 85). To this list I would also add the "mask of motherhood"—a concept developed by Adrienne Rich and Susan Maushart to acknowledge the ways in which mothers put on a false front to hide challenging experiences from one another. In 1976, Rich described the telling of mothers' complex stories, including their socially unacceptable feelings of resentment and rage, as "cracking through" the "masks of motherhood" (25). Maushart later highlighted the mask of motherhood as the facade of a complicit good mother that "keeps us quiet about what we know, to the point where we forget we know anything at all, or anything worth telling" (26). Krause originally adopted the term "pregnancy belly casting" to describe the plaster moulds she made of pregnant bellies, but she soon changed it to "pregnancy belly masking" because she saw the concept of the mask as "an external expression of an internal feeling or thought process" (Krause, Personal interview, 26 June 2017, Tape

A). At first glance the concept of the mask of motherhood seems somewhat at odds with Krause's work of masking pregnant bellies. After all, the aim of the critical discourse on the mask of motherhood is to escape masks, not cast women in them. Yet one could hardly expect that one generation of mothers would be able to simply sidestep the mask altogether. Rich was keenly aware that escaping the masks is not an easy endeavour, and may even be one of the greatest challenges faced by mothers (qtd. in Maushart 309). Instead, what Krause's work did was draw attention to one's entry into the mask of motherhood as a conscious process that could be shaped by the mother in ways that gave women the confidence to tell their stories.

As I will demonstrate, Krause's belly casting process—displayed in her exhibition “In Honor of Pregnant Women,” held at The Family Gallery in Duncan's Mills, California—was important for three reasons. First, it provided a forum for pregnant women's bodies and stories to be on display, which enabled them to be seen in both popular culture and feminism at a point in time when they were hidden from sight and memory. Second, the belly casting and decorating process afforded scope for women to use the language of art to explore their experiences of pregnant subjectivity, if not fully unmasking pregnancy at least exploring new possibilities through art. Third, the exhibited belly masks were an important way for women to mediate their complex feelings about pregnancy that had been previously masked by simplistic cultural discourse, which prompted some female spectators to reflect on their own relationship to the motherlines.

Francine Krause: “Godmother of all Bellycasters”

In 1986, Francine Krause, a professional artist, decided to create a series of plaster moulds of her own pregnant belly with the aim of decorating and exhibiting them as “just one person's journey through pregnancy” (Personal interview, 3 Mar. 2016, Tape A). However, Krause ended up making belly casts for friends and establishing an early, if not the first, belly casting business in 1989 (Personal interview 19 Oct. 2016). Although there is evidence of isolated instances of the practice of pregnancy belly casting since the late 1960s, Krause, who ran her practice from 1989 until 2009, was a key figure in the proliferation of the practice; she estimates that she created 750 belly masks and sold 16,450 belly masking kits, and provided training on the technique to at least forty midwives and spa therapists (Krause, email message to author, 11 Apr. 2018). Indeed, she came to be considered as “the godmother of all bellycasters” (Canger). In 1991, Krause decided to invite women for whom she had made belly masks to exhibit alongside her own artworks because she “realized how significant” the process of belly casting “was to each of the women” (Personal interview, 3 Mar. 2016,



Francine Krause at the 1991 in Honor of Pregnant Women exhibition.

Tape A). Displayed in the exhibition were 34 pregnancy belly masks decorated by 26 women and two men (Krause, email message to author, 7 July 2017). Most women decorated their own belly mask; however, others collaborated on artworks and some created multiple artworks. Most contributors were not professional artists, although some were. Accompanying each belly mask was an artist statement and a photo of the mother with her child. In this article, I primarily focus on the exhibition as an example of an early orientation toward restoring the motherlines, rather than the broader discussion of pregnancy belly masking in relation to class, racial/ethnic diversity, and consumer culture.

Contributors to the exhibition were mainly white, middle-class women, although one woman had Native American heritage and Krause herself is Jewish. There was also some diversity in the families represented, including interracial couples (Krause, Personal interview, 26 June 2017, Tape A). Over the course of her business, Krause served women from a variety of racial and ethnic cultural backgrounds as well as socially disadvantaged women for whom she would sometimes create a belly cast at no charge (Krause, Personal interview, 26 June 2017 Tape A). Although Krause's clients needed to be pregnant to have their own belly cast, mothers who did not have the biological experience of pregnancy (e.g., mothers of adopted children) could still engage with the practice of belly casting. Krause provided the example of women finding healing through painting on someone else's belly mask (Krause, Personal interview, 26 June 2017, Tape A) and also, as discussed later, through viewing the exhibition.

Making the Pregnant Body Visible



Reflections of Life by Jean Williams
Photo: Francine Krause

In contemporary popular culture, the practice of pregnancy belly masking is fairly commonplace and normative. By contrast, journalist Carolyn Lund's comment that Krause's exhibited belly casts were "not an ordinary memento of a life experience" (D1) highlights that belly masking was still a highly unusual art practice in the early 1990s. Krause's exhibition must be viewed in the broader context of the early 1990s as a time in which the pregnant body needed to be made visible in both popular culture and feminism. From Lennart Nilsson's 1965 images of a floating fetus in *Life* magazine onward, the pregnant woman had often been

left "literally transparent" (Matthews and Wexler 198). Rosalind Petchesky's 1987 call to reclaim the pregnant woman from obscurity was pivotal in reorienting feminist focus back to the maternal body (Matthews and Wexler 11). In August 1991, *Vanity Fair* released a landmark cover image of a nude and heavily pregnant Demi Moore. This image "re-envelop[ed] the foetus within the pregnant body" and, therefore, highlighted "ways for women to re-envelop themselves as the subjects of their own gestation" (Tyler 81). Krause's exhibition occurred before Moore's image, which suggests a tide of feminist consciousness about the pregnant body was already awakening at a grassroots level.

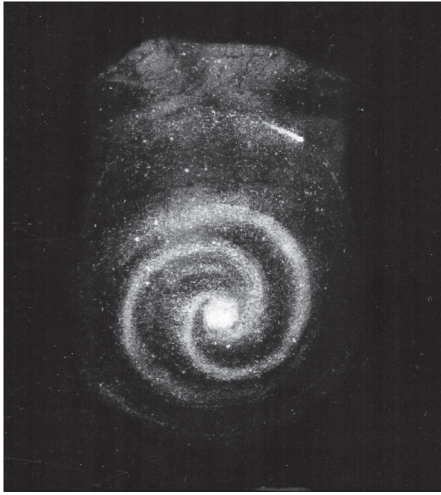
Krause's exhibition provided examples of women putting the unborn child back into the maternal body, seemingly in line with Petchesky's call for the creation of "new images that recontextualize the foetus: that place it back in the uterus, and the uterus back into the woman's body and her body back into its social space" (78). Some women painted neonates' bodies on the front of the mask; one painted red lines flowing from twins to the mother's heart. Another cast titled "Reflections of Life" was simply left in the plain white plaster bandage on the outside, perhaps speaking to the medicalized view of the pregnant body as needing fixing. However, the inside was painted with a navy background with tiny white stars upon which was painted a life-sized image of a neonate sucking its thumb. Yet another belly cast displayed a stylised image

of a woman crouching in a birthing position, her belly full and yoni enlarged. This belly mask was perched on a stand above a circular mirror that reflected the image on the inside of the mask: a neonate tucked up in the womb. That the view is mediated by the mirror suggests the complexity of the entwinement of mother and child. These belly masks break what Imogen Tyler argues was a “taboo surrounding pregnancy” because they highlight “the unsettling effect which pregnant embodiment has upon dominant cultural understandings of the individuated or individual self” (73). These masks highlighted the dual embodiment of pregnancy, and affirmed that the mother’s story cannot be removed from that of the unborn child. They contributed toward healing women’s relationship to the motherlines by creating a much needed “cultural mirror” for pregnant women’s experience (Lowinsky, “Introduction” xi).

Using the Language of Art to Explore Pregnant Subjectivity

Krause’s act of encouraging women to decorate their own masks allowed women to use art to explore a complex range of self-expression and feelings. For Julia Kristeva, birth and pregnancy bring women back into contact with the mother and the presymbolic “pre-linguistic” state (239). Perhaps then, art is a preferable medium for giving voice to the unspeakable nature of pregnancy. As Maushart notes, pregnancy can be “experienced as a form of *dispossession* for many women” (my emphasis, 70). Though writing more generally on mothering, rather than pregnancy, the work of Nané Jordan illustrates how masks can ease a sense of dispossession for mothers. Jordan found that facial masks worn by herself and her children during meal times transformed mundane repetitive everyday tasks into “something more than hurried habits, a way to dwell within the moment” (Jordan 233). For Jordan, then, the mask itself, rather than inhibiting authenticity, actually allows for a more connected experience of motherhood because it focuses awareness on the present. This is similar to Krause’s observations of the pregnancy belly masking process as assisting women to focus on the baby growing within: “I think when the women do the belly mask they take time for themselves; they slow down and they focus on their body and their baby.... I heard that many times, ‘now I am ready to have my baby, now I have had a belly cast’” (Krause, Personal interview, 3 Mar. 2016, Tape B). Thus, belly masks may ease the sense of dispossession experienced during pregnancy, and enable women to focus on the present and the transition to birth.

Rich called for the revolutionary possibility of women being sovereign over their own bodies. She argued that “in such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe” (285–86). Seeming to echo Rich’s metaphor of a new



Cosmic Mother by Caren Catterall



Om to my Daughter by Windi Braden

relationship to the universe, many of the images on the pregnancy belly masks displayed in Krause's exhibition included motifs such as stars, suns, moons, and milky ways. One woman wrote "I am the Cosmic mother. I give birth to the Galaxies and Planets.... I give birth to myself" (Catterall, "Cosmic Mother"). These could be read as women's attempts to symbolically represent the transformations of their relationship to their own bodies as echoed in Rich's words. Maushart also attempts to capture the boundless qualities of women's experience beyond the mask of motherhood: "what lies beneath the brave and brittle face of motherhood is a countenance of infinite expressiveness, a body of deep knowing" (319). The images of the universe drawn upon the literally brittle plaster casts, then, could be a metaphor for the transformation of women's relationship to the mask of motherhood as a more active participant in their creation.

Additionally masks can be thought of as healing. Krause joked that when people saw her advertisement they sometimes mistakenly thought a belly mask

was "some kind of a spa mask like a mud or seaweed mask" (Personal interview, 19 Oct. 2016"). Just as one may wear a mud mask to improve a skin condition such as acne, masks can provide the potential for calming and healing. Krause did in fact view her work as a healing modality, which allowed some form of relief for pregnant women. Many of Krause's friends were midwives and doulas, and Krause came to see her vocation as an opportunity to work with pregnant women in a way that used her gifts as an artist rather than medical

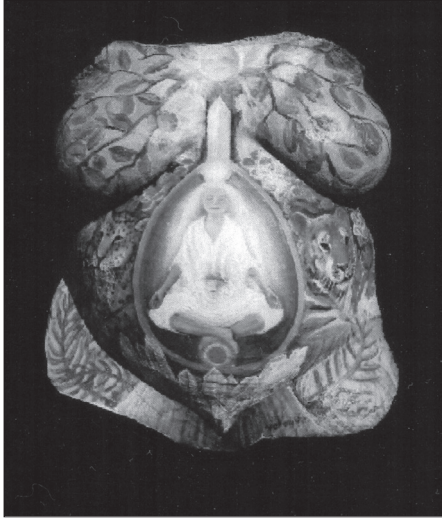
skills (Personal interview, 3 Mar. 2016, Tape B). For instance, she stated: “A lot of women came to me who did not feel good about their bodies and who were afraid of their pregnancy and childbirth and went through a really healing process” (“Personal interview,” 3 Mar. 2016, Tape B). This seems to concur with one artist statement from Krause’s exhibition: “I used artistic expression to heal unresolved fears and to create positive visualisations of how I wanted my birth experience to be” (Catterall, “You in Me, Cassidy”).

Krause’s exhibition must be thoroughly historicized. The majority of the artworks in Krause’s 1991 exhibition presented pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering in a positive light and associated it with positive emotions; it would certainly not appear radical to a contemporary audience. There is an absence of the “grief for the apparently fully individuated, normal body that preceded maternity” as well as the “overwhelming sense of loss of self in the transition to motherhood” (Quiney 36), which are so often witnessed in contemporary accounts of motherhood. Maternal ambivalence is also strikingly absent. One of the exhibitors in Krause’s exhibition, for example, dressed up her belly cast with a pink tutu and wrote in her “Om to my Daughter”: “Your presence in my life makes me feel so very complete” (Braden). Though a beautiful sentiment, such a statement may have rendered women with ambivalent emotions toward their child isolated. Thus, although to a contemporary audience accustomed to “warts and all” stories such examples may seem to be hiding something, the exhibition achieved much for the era in which it was held. Just the fact of putting the pregnant body on display broke an entrenched taboo and would have chipped the mask of motherhood.

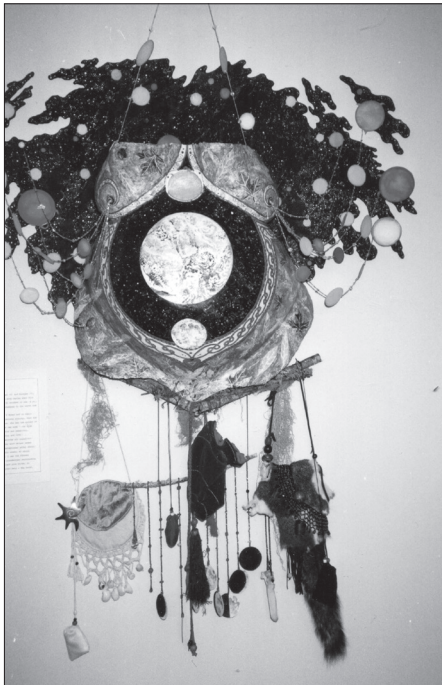
Public Reactions to Krause’s Exhibition

There was significant public interest in Krause’s exhibition with three hundred people at the reception as well as another three hundred visitors to the gallery during the exhibition (Krause, email message, 30 July 2017). Although most comments in the guestbook were positive—along the lines of “So beautiful, so inspiring” and “so exuberant” (*Guestbook*)—Krause recalled that a small percentage of visitors had negative reactions to her exhibition. Some people found the casts “ugly.” For others, particularly devout Christians, the belly masks were “just total obscenity [even] pornography” (Krause, Personal interview, 26 June 2017, Tape B). This accords with the contemporaneous example of Moore’s *Vanity Fair* cover being placed on the “top shelf alongside pornographic publications” (Tyler 75) and again highlights just how radical it was to display naked pregnant bodies in the early 1990s.

At the outset of the exhibition Krause explained that one aim was “to help people relate to the sacred aspects of pregnancy” (Krause qtd. in Lund). In



Pure light being by Suzanne deVeuve



*Goddess Creation: Woman of Stars
by Alexandra Genetti*

this way, the masks in the exhibition mediated an alternative countercultural discourse about the pregnant body. Some of the belly masks, for example, featured Goddesses in both the imagery and accompanying text. To the modern viewer, such masks raise the spectre of essentialism that feminists have largely sought to move away from, but this Goddess art could also be seen in another light: it reconnected women in the early 1990s to the Goddess imagery used in 1970s feminist art and thereby provided an alternative feminist spiritual tradition (motherline) through which to view the pregnant body as sacred rather than an obscenity. (For a discussion of 1970s Goddess art see Dekel.) Exploring contemporary artistic representations of birth and motherhood, Anna Hennessey found that “when women re-sacralize religious and secular objects during pregnancy, labour and birth, they are performing an ontological transition of these objects between *the religious, the secular and the re-sacralised*” (my emphasis, 209-10). Similarly, the women in Krause’s exhibition were able to resacralize the meaning of pregnancy by drawing upon images of Goddesses.

The fact that pregnancy belly masking is a casting and a re-presentation of the body rather than the body itself afforded scope for the transcendence of the essential,

real body. Lowinsky emphasizes stories of the changing landscape of women's bodies, such as developing breasts and birthing, and argues for these to be regarded as "stories of the life cycles," which link women to former generations ("Mother of Mothers" 227); however, this can suggest essentialism. O'Reilly, writing on African American maternal culture, interprets the motherline as "ancestral memory" transmitted through the process of "cultural bearing" ("A Politics" 12). I also interpret motherlines as the transmission of culture and memory rather than of an essentialist feminine quality. I believe that Krause's pregnancy belly masks, which literally created a second skin, served as a metaphor for the socially constructed nature of pregnancy. As one observer of the exhibition remarked, "It looks to me like you've given each woman a new avenue into her own creativity *beyond the biological*" (my emphasis, *Guestbook*, italics).

One of the mother-artists wrote in the accompanying text to her belly mask titled *Goddess Creation; Woman of Stars* of the sense of connection to her motherline past, present, and future: "I see a vision—the wombs of women full—women within women: my child, myself, my mother and endless grandmothers surrounding me. I see the future: my children's children, grandchildren, and I, the ancient grandmother surrounding them" (Genetti).

As Lowinsky suggests, bearing witness to other women's stories creates "sympathetic vibrations so that we can begin to hear our own" ("Introduction" xii). So perhaps it is not surprising that the masks also healed some of the spectator's perceptions of their own and their mother's bodies. Some visitors left comments in the guestbook attesting to the effects of the exhibition on their own and other's wellbeing: "So healing. I've traced my fear of my baby back to my mother's belly. This kind of healing can transcend generations and lifetimes!" (*Guestbook*). Another wrote: "You are providing such a beautiful and unique healing journey for all who encounter you" (*Guestbook*). Krause herself observed that many visitors were touched emotionally by the exhibition; she felt that it provided spectators with "another way to look at their mother, that perhaps their mothers were as proud as these women who were in the show, had those same feelings about them" (Personal interview, 26 June 2017, Tape B). Krause's comments suggest that the exhibition afforded scope for women to explore and potentially heal intergenerational trauma surrounding pregnancy and maternity.

Conclusion

In creating an early public display of pregnant body masks accompanied by narratives, Krause's exhibition highlighted women's complex relationship to the "mask of motherhood" and sowed the seeds for its unmasking. Although they could not fully unmask motherhood, they did nonetheless provide draw

attention to the potential for pregnant women of transitioning into the mask of motherhood in a conscious way. This transition, in turn, has the potential to challenge established discourses of the pregnant body and to create an avenue through which the mother-artists and the audience alike could explore their relationship to their bodies and their own maternal lineage.

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