

Artist Mothers and Virtual Collectives: Making Art and Community from Home

Artists who are mothers are still disadvantaged in the trajectory of their careers by the patriarchal institutions of motherhood and the art world as well as by the physical realities of mothering that may prevent them from pursuing their professional creative practices. Despite the contemporary discourse around equality in the home and the workplace, women still carry the burden of the majority of domestic chores. The transformative experiences of pregnancy, giving birth, and mothering are often dismissed by professionals in the art world, a disavowal that may exaggerate the split between one's artistic and maternal selves. This failure of recognition within the art world may be deleterious to a mother artist's sense of wellbeing. Conversely, art that embodies maternal experience may be beneficial to the wellbeing of mothers who may otherwise only be exposed to images of idealized motherhood in mainstream visual culture. This article examines the ways in which technology and the Internet are changing and expanding the ways mother artists can connect and form communities as well as how this shapes their art and may increase their sense of wellbeing. It will explore in particular An Artist Residency in Motherhood, an "open source artist residency to empower and inspire" mother artists (Clayton).

A version of this paper was first presented at the AMIRCI Conference 2019: Beyond Mothering Myths? Motherhood in an Age of Neoliberalism and Individualisation, University of Sydney, 10–12 July.

This article examines the strategies mothers may use in overcoming gender and structural bias in the art world to practice empowered mothering and making. These strategies include working within physical and virtual collectives and networks and employing collaborative practices. These strategies have implications for maternal health and wellbeing, as they offer mother artists possibilities for ongoing creative practice and agency. Although

it has been shown that ongoing creative practice and engagement in the visual arts is beneficial to mental health and wellbeing (Davies, Knuiman, and Rosenberg), for mother artists, maternal work may impede professional creative practice. The split between a woman's prematernal and maternal identities may be intensified for artists whose motherwork is devalued by the patriarchal structures of the art world. Thus, mother artists may be doubly affected by the failures of the feminist revolution in both the domestic sphere, where women continue to take responsibility for most of the care and maintenance work, and the professional world of the creative arts, where a belief still exists that mothers cannot be serious artists. However, art that embodies maternal experience may also be beneficial to nonartist mothers, as it offers alternatives to the images of perfect, idealized motherhood, which are perpetuated in mainstream visual culture (Betterton 5; C. Johnson; Douglas and Michaels 7).

This article explores sites of mother artists' creativity, connectivity, and collaboration, especially Lenka Clayton's innovative project, *An Artist Residency in Motherhood (ARiM)*. Clayton describes ARiM as an "open source artist residency (designed) to empower and inspire" mother artists. Contemporary art historian and cultural theorist Andrea Liss argues that Clayton's revolutionary strategy dissolves "hard borders—real geographic and economic borders as well as psychic limits—[these] are replaced with tender embraces that complicate simple binary oppositions and where spaces of public and private collide and coalesce" (Liss, "Lenka Clayton's Maternal Economy" 130). Art historian Clare Johnson has also found that artworks that embody ambivalent maternal experiences are also important in opening up discussions beyond the binaries of good and bad mother and providing "an alternative visual repertoire to popular narratives of failed or achieved maternal femininity" (C. Johnson 3). This article discusses the historical precedence for Clayton's model, including the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose works focus attention on labour and undervalued care work, and the women's art movement of the 1970s, as well as other feminist art organizations in Australia and internationally that empower women artists through collectivity and community. Finally, this article explores the potentially detrimental aspects of connecting online, including the "momification of the internet" (Dewey), the feminization of Facebook, the monetization of our care networks, and the shadow work that insidiously adds to our already overwhelming burdens of labour (van Cleef 459; Hartley).

Artists who are mothers are still disadvantaged in the trajectory of their careers by the patriarchal institutions of motherhood and the art world as well as the physical, emotional, and financial realities of mothering, which are, of course, variable for all women. Despite the contemporary discourse around equality in the home and the workplace, women are still burdened with the

majority of domestic chores (Wilkins and Lass 82). Women are still paid less than men, generally and in the art world, which makes it difficult to justify maintaining an art practice when outsourcing care work is so expensive, financially and emotionally (Jean Hailes for Women's Health 4). The myth that women cannot excel while being both a mother and an artist is perpetuated by, for example, successful artists Marina Abramovich, Tracey Emin, and Judy Chicago, who have variously stated they chose their art careers over motherhood (Brady). Every woman should have the right to choose whether or not to have children, but the statements of these artists perpetuate the masculinist idea that women cannot do both and, most damagingly, also devalue the creative and empowering potential of experiential knowledge that maternal thinking can engender (Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* xix). Johnson finds that artworks offering alternative views of mothering to those prevalent in mainstream visual culture can increase a new mother's sense of wellbeing by allowing new conversations to occur outside of medicalized care and the judgment of peer groups (3).

Clayton began ARiM on a private and personal scale to counter the exclusions she felt as a mother artist by returning to familiar ways of working. In doing so, she "directly engages the devaluation of carework by framing motherhood as a valuable site, rather than an invisible labour, for exploration and artistic production" (van Cleaf 452). During the period of her three-year residency at home in motherhood, Clayton posted on her website about her practice and was contacted by many women in similar situations. Thus, since 2015, she has made available on her website the materials required to undertake an ARiM—a manifesto, business cards, and the website itself—through which mother artists can connect with others across the world. These physical artefacts of work constitute a personal and political statement and connect mothers to their professional identities even within the domestic space, where caring and professional roles compete.

Clayton's model of residency—as well as other support networks and artworks she has developed, such as her collaborative performance, *Two Itinerant Quilters* (2015)—is based on ideas of maternal ethics (Liss, "Lenka Clayton's Maternal Economy" 128). Liss writes that it is in enacting this "loving respect for the labour of others" (128) that Clayton's work is linked to a tradition that includes Ukeles's ground-breaking work from the 1970s. Ukeles maintenance works focus attention on the repetitive, invisible labour of mothering as well as the work of "nurturing and maintaining natural and psychic life systems [and] the undervalued labor of people who keep those systems alive" (Liss, *Feminist Art and the Maternal* 44). This focus on labour exemplifies philosopher Sara Ruddick's belief in the need to strip away the idealization of the mother and metaphors of mothering as well as D.W. Winicott's ideas of "ordinary devotion," wherein ideologies of motherwork

and the selfless sacrifice of the mother are described as the very banal work that ensures the preservation of children (van Cleef 452). In her foundational text Ruddick describes how the reflective practice of motherhood—with its regular, repetitive, and cyclical work—structures our thinking and holds that maternal thinking can, in fact, be creative and empowering (22). These modes of working and thinking may alleviate the anxiety and stress related to women's sense of individualized success or failure in the project of motherhood (Douglas and Michaels 5; Littler 5).

Collaborative feminist art practices of the 1960s and 1970s were deliberately “democratic, supportive and anti-hierarchical” and sought to break down patriarchal structures of art working and gendered workforces (Adams). In her article “Looking from With/In: Feminist Art Projects of the 70s,” in the *Outskirts Online Journal*, Australian artist Jude Adams describes her participation in the collaborative practices of the 1970s women's liberation and women's art movement (WAM) as “an exciting, intense and empowering time.” She says working with groups of women formed “an implicit critique of the figure of the heroic male artist who is central to traditional art history.” Although much of her work depicts the private, domestic sphere of a mother's life at home and the “transformative potential of mothers' quotidian experiences” (Freney), at the same time, she was active in “consciousness raising groups, WAMs and feminist collective projects that place value on conversation, connectivity and women-to-women relationships” (Adams).

Despite feminist activism in the arts in the 1970s and beyond, exclusions and discriminations are still experienced by mother artists, as concluded by a 2017 Australian survey, “Culture of Silence: Arts Parents Accepting, Rejecting or Adapting to, an Unfriendly Workplace,” by Jessie Scott, Nina Ross, and Lizzy Sampson. The survey of artist parents, of which over 90 per cent were women, found that access to galleries, studios, and arts opportunities were limited for carers of children. Furthermore, the respondents reported that they “were immediately excluded from a huge amount of networking opportunities.” The survey also added the following: “Despite a lack of availability and access, most of the respondents said that they did not experience a lack of desire to make art after having children. In many cases, they were finding ways to adapt their parenthood to their practice and vice versa” (Scott, Ross, and Sampson).

The isolation of motherhood is further exacerbated by exclusions from professional and creative practices, such as those mentioned above. When I became a mother many of my peers seemed to assume I was dropping out of the art world. Today, my best friends are the mothers of my sons' friends. One is a meteorologist, the other a Spanish teacher. We may initially have had little in common, but what we do have in common dominates much of our lives. These women are what Rebecca Tardy calls my “back-backstage”—we wait in

each other's wings to listen, advise, pick up the pieces on any topic, and speak openly together about taboos that may not be shared elsewhere (Tardy qtd in S.A. Johnson 245). Together, we constitute an "intimate mothering public, a forum through which women gather experiential information and practical support." Such places "are particularly useful for thinking about the meaning-making practices and learning experiences that occur during intimate online and face-to-face interactions" (S.A. Johnson 247).

It was not until my eldest son was around thirteen that I found similar support from arts industry peers, when an old art school friend who had recently had a baby initiated a "lounge room studio," a kind of a mums' group for artists. These evening get-togethers were important and valuable as a means of support, as we worked on our own small artworks while mulling over our joys and travails in maternal work. This group inspired the Fight for Self (FFS) forum that took place in Adelaide in 2017 and invited mothers as well as artists and curators to respond to the question "What are you fighting for?" The responses were later manifested as a mind map shown as part of the exhibition, *Good Mother*, at the Central Gallery in Adelaide in 2018. This collaborative work was "driven by an agenda to make visible the experiences of mother-artists, the work itself is a site of creative empowerment that is both democratic and supportive in its creation and conceptualisation" (Lane). The forum was a lively, intergenerational conversation about the bias against mothers in the art world and finding collective and collaborative solutions. But by the time the FFS mind map work was shown, I had drifted away from the lounge room studio mums' group. It was too late for me. While the other mothers compared colicky babies and hours of sleep (or not) per night, I was often absent, standing on the side of a soccer pitch watching tweens gallop about or driving teenagers home from work. Intimate mothering publics, face to face and online, attract women who are going through the same problems and milestones together. Our mother identities and concerns change as our families grow up and we seek out women who are encountering similar shifts. Connections that value and recognize the changing nature of maternal identity are beneficial for mothers in a society that still idealizes motherhood and simplifies mothers' experiences.

Today, women may have more opportunities than ever before to find intimate mothering publics, where we can make meaning of maternal work and learn from one another's experiential knowledge, without even leaving home. So many mothers today make connections online—via Facebook, mummy blogs, special interest blogs, and other forums—that there is now evidence for the "momification of the internet," as mothers incorporate digital media into their daily lives at a more and more intimate level (van Cleef 449). Sociologist Kara van Cleef describes mothering blogs as "real time manuals of motherhood, detailing both how to do motherhood as well as how to interpret

the shifts in identity that accompany it” (449). Mothers are using these online platforms to share their experiences with one another to create more democratized models of knowledge and expertise.

A good example of how such networks are beneficial to maternal wellbeing can be seen in researcher Alison Mayne’s study of how connectivity can alleviate isolation and loneliness. Her study shows how members of an amateur crafters’ Facebook group support each other and “highlights how both the acts of making and of sharing making online contribute to participants’ sense of positive wellbeing” (Mayne). By sharing images of their textile works, the members of the group receive “positive strokes,” which improve their self-esteem and link them to a community of makers with shared interests (Mayne). But aspects of women’s online networks replicate patterns of patriarchal culture in the real world. The crafters in Mayne’s study, and the women seeking and offering advice on mummy blogs, often adopt a self-deprecating tone, which “extends constructs of feminine non-competitiveness and non-technicality” (van Cleaf 456-57). Although this self-deprecating tone may constitute a form of care among community members, it is stereotypical of women’s culture and femininity, and undermines the abilities of group members to have agency and authority in the real world (Morrison 38).

Ruddick’s description of a mothers’ group remains relevant for online groups—a “mother’s group is a set of people with whom she identifies to the degree that she would count failure to meet their criteria of acceptability as her failure” (21). Yet the relative anonymity of the Internet means women may be more open discussing taboos and perceived failures online than in face-to-face groups (S.A. Johnson 241). Importantly, the structuring of behaviour of the mothers’ group, as well as the stereotypically feminine self-deprecating tone, is not present in Clayton’s ARiM model—a model that gives mothers agency to develop and participate in a residency within motherhood on their own terms, supported by the noncommercialized resources available on the ARiM website. Women set the parameters of the residency as well as its duration and outcomes, and although it is like participating in a kind of virtual network, the residency is not solely reliant on Internet connectivity. Although continuing one’s art practice is often essential for the wellbeing of mother artists, other mothers may also benefit from the artworks that emerge from this process. Johnson finds that when new mothers are invited to discuss artworks that explore alternative experiences of maternal femininity they open up to discuss otherwise taboo topics, such as loneliness, boredom, and ambivalence, without fearing the judgment of peer groups (C. Johnson). Thus, it is essential that mother artists have the means to articulate their experiences of motherhood, which so often counter the flattened versions of motherhood that proliferate in popular visual culture (Douglas and Michaels 7).

Although it is clear that online connections have benefits for many women,

the maintenance of these networks may also have detrimental effects. As was noted in the 1980s by Ruth Schwarz Cowan, carework is closely linked to a society's prevailing technology, and now "the latest implements in care and housework include the screen, network, and social media platforms" (van Cleaf 455). It has long been claimed technology will alleviate the time spent working, yet the opposite seems true for many mothers, who bear increasing loads of shadow work. Although the Internet is a useful resource in many ways, not least in sharing taboo topics and concerns with supportive anonymous others, digital work is still work (Gregory 3). Many scholars believe mummy blogs and Internet groups may constitute carework, being unpaid and seemingly motivated by love; others, however, warn that the constant necessity to check in and be caring is an increasingly unmanageable economy of care, in which mothers must always "keep an eye on their networks as part of their caregiving work" (van Cleaf 454).

Mothers must also manage the physical, behavioural, and cultural effects of our digital work hours. For example, the new term "brexting" describes the practice of texting while breastfeeding, a practice that has been criticized for its perceived effects on infant development (Malcolm). The idea that mothers endanger their children's wellbeing through their Internet connectivity may be used as a backlash against the new possibilities for mothers' connected, collective empowerment. A cartoon by Michael Leunig published recently in Melbourne's *The Age* Newspaper motivated mothers to take to social media to express their outrage at its stereotyping of their Internet use as harmful to their children. The image depicts a woman so focused on the screen of her smartphone that she does not notice her baby has fallen out of its pram. Feminist author Clementine Ford writes that the cartoon amounts to "condescending judgement" and that most of her screen time, and that of other women she knows, is for work and for connecting with other mothers for support (Ford qtd. in "Leunig Cartoon Criticising Mothers").

Mothers' online behaviours stand out compared to other Internet users (van Cleaf 451). The very thing that draws women to these intimate collectivities—sharing, supporting and commenting—make them susceptible to marketing and monetization by Internet corporations and advertisers. Although these mothers overwhelmingly use the Internet to gain support from online connections, their online activities and real-life spending habits have been targeted and have generated profits for viral content mills that make money from clicks on their sites (Dewey). This reality problematizes the carework undertaken on online platforms, whose operators may denigrate and undermine maternal work through constant advertising and exploitation (Dewey). At the same time as researchers celebrate the democratization of maternal knowledge, targeted advertising—visual media that idealizes particular forms of maternal femininity—constantly tells mothers they lack

the skills, means, and materials to mother effectively.

Clayton's residency structure in ARiM is revolutionary compared to other online platforms. Hers is an open structure that women can adapt to their own mutable and diverse circumstances. There is no jury, no selection process, and no marketing. Reinstating the mantra of second-wave feminist artists, it is a platform that recognizes the political act inherent in mothers bringing their private labour into public awareness. The Internet has certainly been instrumental in the accessibility of Clayton's model, as it has grown from a small, individual practice used to alleviate her own obstacles to practicing her art in motherhood to having over seven hundred women across the world participating in their own residencies since 2013 (Liss, "Lenka Clayton's Maternal Economy" 128-29). In an interview, Clayton says, "The big part of the residency is reminding people that whatever their circumstances are, they can still have their own agency" ("Dialogues"). Feeling empowered, or having agency, within one's mothering and art practices is important in the maintenance of maternal health and wellbeing.

I am not a sociologist but have approached the problem of mothers' isolation and connectivity from the perspective of a mother artist who has now been working in this sticky milieu for over sixteen years. It is this experiential, nonexpert approach that is validated by online communities and intimate mothering publics. Yet mother artists still find their carework is disdained and their maternal work is seen to preclude them from making serious art. For me, the most useful, caring, and revolutionary model in making art from within motherhood has been Lenka Clayton's (ARiM). It is this model that has allowed me to reimagine the domestic as a novel site for art making and to begin to reconcile my roles of mother and artist. In producing artwork that embodies my maternal experiences, I contribute to growing field of visual culture that questions, critiques, and challenges the idealized images of motherhood perpetuated in mainstream visual media.

Works Cited

- Adams, Jude. "Looking from with/in: feminist art projects of the 70s." *Outskirts Online Journal*, vol. 29, 2013, www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-29/adams-jude-looking-with-in. accessed 13 June 2020.
- Betterton, Rosemary. *Maternal Bodies in the Visual Arts*. Manchester University Press. 2014.
- Brady, Anna. "Bringing up Baby: Making Motherhood Work in the Art World." *The Art Newspaper*, 12 June 2019, www.theartnewspaper.com/feature/bringing-up-baby-making-motherhood-work-in-the-art-world. Accessed 13 June 2020.

- Clayton, Lenka. *Artist Website*, lenka-clayton.squarespace.com. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Cleaf, Kara van. "Our Mothers Have Always Been Machines: The Conflation of Media and Motherhood." *Digital Sociologies*, edited by Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory, and Tressie McMillan Cottom, Policy Press, 2017, pp. 449-62.
- Davies, Christina, Matthew Knuiaman, and Michael Rosenberg. "The Art of Being Mentally Healthy: A Study to Quantify the Relationship between Recreational Arts Engagement and Mental Well-Being in the General Population." *BMC Public Health*, vol. 16, no. 15, 2016, bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s12889-015-2672-7. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Dewey, Caitlin. "The Fastest-Growing 'News' Site of 2015 Was an Obscure Content Farm for Moms." *Washington Post*, 21 Jan. 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2015/07/16/how-moms-won-the-internet-and-what-that-means-for-the-rest-of-us/?utm_term=.6587e7353963. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- "Dialogues Interviews Lenka Clayton, Artist and Founder of An Artist Residency in Motherhood (ARiM)." *Residency Unlimited*, 2018, www.residencyunlimited.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/RU-Dialogues-Dialogues-Interviews-Lenka-Clayton-Artist-and-Founder-of-An-Artist-Residency-in-Motherhood.pdf. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Douglas, Susan J., and Michaels, Meredith W. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*. Simon & Schuster. 2005.
- Freney, Zoe. "Review: Jude Adams: Narratives from the Family Album." *Artlink*, 2018, www.artlink.com.au/articles/4732/jude-adams-narratives-from-the-family-album/. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Gregory, Karen. "Structure and Agency in a Digital World." *Digital Sociologies*, edited by Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory, and Tressie McMillan Cottom, Policy Press, 2017, pp. 3-8.
- Hartley, Gemma. "*The Next Feminist Target? The Draining Impact of Invisible Emotional Labour*." Sydney Morning Herald, 31 Oct. 2018, www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/the-next-feminist-target-the-draining-impact-of-invisible-emotional-labour-20181030-h179ln.html. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Jean Hailes for Women's Health. "Women's Health Survey 2018: Understanding Health Information Needs and Health Behavior of Women in Australia." Jean Hailes, 2018, jeanhailes.org.au/contents/documents/News/Womens-Health-Survey-Report-web.pdf. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Johnson, Clare. "Maternal Art and Post-Natal Wellbeing: Proximity and Separation in Lena Simic's Contemplation Time (2007-8) and Eti Wade's Jocasta (2008)." *Studies in the Maternal*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1-23.

- Johnson, Sophia Alice. "Intimate Mothering Publics': Comparing Face-to-Face Support Groups and Internet Use for Women Seeking Information and Advice in the Transition to First-Time Motherhood." *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2015, pp. 237-51
- Lane, Gabrielle. "Good Mother." *Exhibition Catalogue*. Glenside, South Australia, Central Gallery, 2018.
- "Leunig Cartoon Criticising Mothers' Use of Instagram and Social Media Sparks Backlash." *ABC online*, 24 Oct. 2019, www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-24/leunig-cartoon-criticising-mother-use-of-instagram-sparks-debate/11634522. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Liss, Andrea. *Feminist Art and the Maternal*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Liss, Andrea. "Lenka Clayton's Maternal Economy: The Performance of Wonder and Respect." *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2017, pp. 127-30.
- Littler, Jo. "The Rise of the 'Yummy Mummy': Popular Conservatism and the Neoliberal Maternal in Contemporary British culture." *Communication, Culture and Critique*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2013, pp. 227-43.
- Malcolm, Lynne. "Look Up and Connect." *All in the Mind*, ABC Radio National, 30 June 2019, radio.abc.net.au/programitem/pe5DBaj12L. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Mayne, Alison. "Feeling Lonely, Feeling Connected: Amateur Knit and Crochet Makers." *Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA)*, 2016, shura.shu.ac.uk/12272/. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Morrison, Aimee. "Suffused by Feeling and Affect': The Intimate Public of Personal Mommy Blogging." *Biography*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 37-55.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*. The Women's Press Limited, 1990.
- Scott, Jessie, Nina Ross, and Lizzy Sampson. "Culture of Silence: Arts Parents Accepting, Rejecting or Adapting to, an Unfriendly Workplace." Presented at the *Women* Art and Feminism in Australia Conference*, February 2018, VCAUniversity, Melbourne, docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/cb004d_49d8b51d2ed944699267d91902b019ad.pdf. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- Wilkins, Roger, and Inga Lass. "The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 16." *Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research*, 2018, melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/2839919/2018-HILDA-SR-for-web.pdf. Accessed 13 June 2020