

Natalie Loveless

Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein Eds, *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2011), 427 pp., ISBN: 978-0986667121, \$49.95, paperback.

‘...we wanted to both revive the initial debates around motherhood, subjectivity, and maternal desire and to look back at those debates from the vantage point of twenty years of work on maternity and maternal subjectivity.’<sup>i</sup>

As a feminist-mother-artist-theorist writing and making art that reflects on the context of feminist-maternal-art-and-theory today, I have a lot at stake in what one could call the ‘maternal turn.’ This turn is marked by new social media networks, curatorial projects, and recent and upcoming publications that argue for the maternal as a crucial location from which to explore the conditions, ethics, and futures of feminism today. Such turns, of course, are made and not found. Jennie Klein and Meryl Chernick’s *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, published in May of 2011 by Canada’s Demeter Press, contributes to the making of this maternal turn in contemporary feminist art history, theory and practice today.<sup>ii</sup>

Taking on the vexed history of feminist art activism and feminist motherhood, the volume reminds us of the texture of some of the past forty years of debate and negotiation surrounding the maternal in the context of contemporary art.<sup>iii</sup> Its central assertion is that ‘although feminism has made radical incursions into the male-dominated art world during the past thirty years, mothers and the representation of motherhood remain on the margins of art practice’ (2). As this quotation suggests, a concern with *representations* and their receptions forms the backbone of *The M Word*. In this, the volume participates in the well-trod, but nonetheless important, political project of shifting cultural representations by offering alternative visions and voices.

*The M Word* covers all the bases one would expect it to, and does so well: it attends to the maternal with a feminist-intersectional eye attentive to multiple axes of difference, including adoption (Laura Larson’s ‘Hidden Mother’), non-heteronormative

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parenting (Cherri Gaulke and Sue Maberry's *Marriage Matters*) and maternal sexuality (Christen Clifford's 'Baby Love: How My Son Became the Other Man'). It covers different historical, international, and cultural perspectives (from Nancy Gerber's 'We Don't Talk About Mothers Here': Seeking the Maternal in Holocaust Memoir and Art' and Michelle Moravec's 'Make Room for Mommy: Feminist Artists and My Maternal Musings' to Maria Assumpta Bassas Vila's 'S.O.S.: Searching for the Mother in the Family Album'). Styles range from theorisations of the maternal (Jennie Klein's 'Visualizing Maternity in Contemporary Art: Race, Culture, Class'), to examples of maternal art (Barbara T. Smith's 'The Coffins: Xerox Books'), to personal reflections on maternal experience (Mignon Nixon's 'Epilogue: Spider'). We are offered a total of twenty-one essay-type offerings, plus curatorial overviews of five recent art exhibitions on the topic. Given the breadth of this undertaking, it is not surprising that *The M Word* offers no thesis on the state of feminist maternal art today.

Instead, divided into six sections (three that feature artist pages and images interspersed with three that gather together essays under thematic headings), the volume invites us *structurally* to tack back and forth between theoretical reflections on motherhood, narrative reflections on motherhood, and visual interventions into the maternal status-quo. As the editors state in their introduction, ' [t]he images reproduced in the book show the process of becoming – becoming-mother for the artists and becoming-other for the children. As such they provide a counter-narrative that both supports and exceeds these texts' (14). This commitment to multiplicity is evidenced not only by the interspersed and varied documents representing artists working at the intersection of art and motherhood, but also by the number of textual strategies and voices represented by the volume's essays.

The first selection of essays, 'Conversations and Questions', sets a broad context for the volume, inviting reflection on some of the initial terms of feminist debate surrounding the maternal in the 1970s – and similarities and differences today. To do so, it reprints germinal texts by Susan Rubin Sulieman and Mary Kelly, and offers new interviews with each of them. It also reprints a more recent essay, with an additional postscript, by the feminist art historian and author of *Feminist Art and the Maternal*, Andrea Liss. The section on 'Contemporary Art and the Maternal: Articulating the Maternal Metaphor in Feminist Art' follows up on this, with personal and art historical accounts of work from the 70s or work related to the 70s, and the final section of essays

(‘Finding The Maternal In The Visual Field: Practice, Narratives, Images’) devotes itself to texts by feminist artist-mothers who mobilize a wide variety of voices and textual strategies, from auto-ethnography (Danielle Abrams), to short fiction (Myrel Chernick), to testimonial (Ellen McMahon, Tanya Llewellyn, Margaret Morgan, Silvia Ziranek), to experimental text/image explorations (Nadja Millner-Larsen and Sherry Millner, Myrel Chernick, Jane Gallop) and the complex affective terrain of care-work (Rachel Hall, Sarah E. Webb). Together, these sections explore a number of well-articulated axes of thinking on motherhood, including maternal affect, mythic representations of the maternal, and maternal labour.

Deliberately wide-ranging, these sections fruitfully bring attention to maternal subjectivity as a complex and multi-faceted location from which to think through contemporary feminist art theory and practice. That said, I want, briefly, to speak to the way that *The M Word* reproduces a certain anxiety that has historically surrounded feminist art and the maternal, despite dealing with others head-on. The sexuality of the maternal, for example, is well known to be a difficult and taboo subject, and one that the volume critically addresses in a number of places, notably Margaret Morgan’s ‘Fragments’ and Christen Clifford’s ‘Baby Love: How my Infant Son Became the Other Man.’ The latter offers an irreverent and racy reflection on the common but little talked about issue of mother-child sexuality – the complete rerouting of the sexual drives that can accompany the intense intimacy of infant care work. Similarly difficult, it seems, based on a number of the volume’s essays, but *not* taken up critically, is the threat of sentimentality.

In the introduction, Chernick and Klein assert that ‘...*The M Word* aims to foreground the relationship among theory, practice, and imagery... we have tried to avoid the *traditionally sentimental* images in favour of work that is rigorously conceptual’ (7, emphasis added). Similarly, in Chernick’s curatorial statement for *Maternal Metaphors*, she tells the reader that she ‘sought work that criticized our cultural and social institutions rather than depicted the traditional mother/child dyad’ (256). While not referring directly to the problem of sentimentality, it is traditionally the maternal dyad that bears the weight of this charge. One of the volume’s artists, Ellen McMahon (‘Art Between Us’), describes how ‘my MFA exhibition was about the pressures of my daily life and my ambivalence towards motherhood. It consisted of oversized photographic self-portraits, my head wrapped in baby undershirts, covered with projections of my daughters’ writing and drawing.’ However, McMahon writes, as soon as the MFA was over she refrained

from working again in this manner to ‘avoid the pitfalls of *voyeurism and sentimentality*’ (324, emphasis added). Artist Leslie Reid, too, speaks of a resistance to producing art about her children for fear of being ‘coloured by association with *essentialism, sentiment and autobiography*’ (327, emphasis added). Towards the end of her essay, Reid insists that ‘my painting is not a study of my sons; it is about the critical space of the mother-child relationship’ (330). Through statements such as these McMahon and Reid bring attention to the importance of taking *mothering* seriously in art: not art about children – the child as content – but art that fleshes out maternal affects, ambivalences, and ecologies. That is, while ambivalence is, seemingly, a safe affective field of inquiry for the way it challenges traditional structures of feminine maternal affect, sentimentality is not. Instead, sentiment is aligned with *voyeurism* and *essentialism* in a way that does not lend itself to critically refashioning normative conceptions of the maternal. This perspective, while prevalent in the volume, and indicated by the volume’s titular focus on metaphor and, through this, a discourse of representation, is worth noting. It should not, however, overshadow the degree to which many modes of maternal affect – including sentiment, in all of its complex *materiality* – are important to *The Real M Word*.<sup>iv</sup>

In her essay in section one of the volume, Andrea Liss calls for a contemporary re-evaluation of maternal ethics. With a respectful nod to French feminism’s version of the maternal, she asks us to take seriously the ‘both-and’ quality of maternal labour as one in which the circuits of self and other are renegotiated through the frameworks of an ethics of care.<sup>v</sup> Liss calls this ‘both-and’ quality – one that plays with and inhabits rather than rejects or succumbs to ‘either-or’ frameworks – a practice of ‘thinking (m)otherwise’ (Liss 2009, pp.xiii-xxi). While strides have been made, Liss reminds us that ‘it is still against the norm in the field of cultural theory and visual art writing for a feminist to proclaim herself a mother or a mother to name herself a feminist’ (9) – her norm here relying upon an ‘either-or’ frame that devalues care-work. While this is undoubtedly true in many contexts, it is important that we ask, in frameworks such as these, what *kind* of feminist one is naming oneself.

As is well known, feminist theory has, since its beginnings, worked to problematise binary distinctions and the seemingly fixed ‘nature’ of identity categories; it has been concerned with the link between the personal – how we experience ourselves, imagine our identities, and think about our subjectivity – and the political – how these imaginings inform our social spaces. In response to this, many contemporary feminist

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‘neo materialist’ thinkers have suggested that our world is not ‘in the first instance’ composed of ‘subjects and objects,’ but that, rather, it is made of ‘various materialities constantly engaged in a network of relations’ (Bennett 2004, p.354)<sup>vi</sup>. For a new materialist, we are ‘never outside of a sticky web of connections or an ecology’ (Bennett 2004, p.365). While grounded in a ‘return to the body,’ these thinkers demonstrate a commitment to non-determinist modes of signification and analysis – modes that aim to produce experiential complexity rather than representational unity. This new materialist perspective, while not overtly referenced in *The M Word*, nonetheless opens up the framework in which certain affective states are aligned squarely with an embarrassingly normative maternal body while others are recuperated as critically provocative. While on the surface the volume – and its title<sup>vii</sup> – may seem to privilege the discourse of representational practice and conceptualism, it is *The M Word’s* interwoven messy trips into affective states such as nostalgia, sentimentality and love that, on top of the many ways that it brings attention to heterogenous maternal experience and critical reflection, make it an important contribution to the discourse of contemporary feminist-art mothering.

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<sup>i</sup> Myrel C. and J. Klein Eds. 2011. *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*. Toronto: Demeter Press. p. 8. Hereafter page numbers given in text.

<sup>ii</sup> Other voices I am thinking of include (but are not limited to) Bracha Ettinger’s *The Matrixial Borderspace* (2006), Andrea Liss’s monograph *Feminist Art and The Maternal* (2009), Rachel Powers’ *The Divided Heart: Art and Motherhood* (2012), Rachel Epp Buller’s *Reconciling Art and Motherhood* (2012), and the upcoming *Performing Motherhood* edited by Amber Kinser, Kryn Freehling-Burton and Terri Hawkes (Demeter Press, expected 2014). In the field of contemporary art, I am thinking of projects such as Irene Lusztig’s *The Motherhood Archives* and Mary Trunk’s *Lost In Living*, both of which explore the maternal through film, and Rebecca Niederlander and Iris Anna Regn’s *Broodwork*, a social practice collaboratory out of Los Angeles dedicated to nurturing new thinking and connection at the intersection of contemporary art and motherhood. As for exhibitions, the four exhibitions covered in the volume, *Maternal Metaphors I and II* (2004 and 2006), *Doublebind* (2003), *MOTHER/mother-\** (2009), immediately come to mind as well as my *New Maternalisms* (2012).

<sup>iii</sup> This debate, surrounding so-called ‘essentialist’ and ‘anti-essentialist’ representational practices and theoretical frameworks is one that does not need to be rehearsed again here. For those interested in the vexed binary terms of the debate please see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (1989) and Mary Kelly, *Imagining Desire* (1998) amongst others.

<sup>iv</sup> Also, importantly, I consider this less a criticism of the volume than an opportunity to highlight one small facet of it in order describe and reformulate an ongoing site of debate surrounding feminist art that works from or addresses maternal experience in a feminist context.

<sup>v</sup> For a beautiful feminist essay on the politics of care with which I am very much aligned see Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s 2011 essay ‘Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things’.

For this formulation I draw on Maria Puig De La Bellacasa’s essay ‘Matters of Care’. While not attending to the maternal per se, the essay offers a consideration of care work that my thinking through a maternal care ethics.

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<sup>vi</sup> I am thinking here of thinkers like Jane Bennett, Teresa Brennan, Isabel Stengers and Karen Barad, to name a few.

<sup>vii</sup> *The M Word* plays on the 2004-2009 Showtime hit, *The L Word*, aligning the word 'mother' with the taboo, the transgressive, and that in need of recuperation within popular cultural imaginaries.

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