Chapter One:
Rememory

You were embedded within my art practice from your very beginning, interacting with it before I even knew that I was pregnant with you. It seems more than coincidental that I was in the busiest period of my career so far, working simultaneously on the two largest and (physically) heaviest works I had ever made, when you\(^1\) took root in my womb. These two works were far more demanding and ambitious (in concept, construction and 'performance') than anything I had previously attempted. It seems to me as if you were proving yourself strong enough to enter this world, by 'hanging on in there' despite the strain that I was unwittingly putting my pregnant self (both mind and body), and thus also you, under. However, although I was not consciously aware that I was pregnant, maybe I (the 'I' that is both conscious and unconscious, body and mind) did in some way 'know'.

During the construction of these two artworks I was working physically very hard, often in very hot weather. On my way home one day I decided to buy a case of my favourite beer, as a reward for my hard work. After arriving home I was about to open a beer when I realised that I didn’t want it, it didn’t appeal to me at all. I didn’t think much about it, but a few weeks later, finding out that I was pregnant with you, I thought of that still untouched case of beer and was surprised to find that I had actually known that I was pregnant for some time, somewhere within the synthesis of my body and brain. I had started to look after you before I was consciously aware that you were growing inside me.\(^2\)

\(^1\) An existential question arises immediately. ‘You’ or ‘it’? When does a foetus become a person?

\(^2\) Ruddick, suggesting the existence of a form of thinking specific to pregnancy, a “distinctive natal reflection”, identifies the body as a “site of knowledge”. (Ruddick, "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth", p. 41.) For more on this see Chapter Two, pp. 28-29.
Around the same time I remember walking slowly across campus on an incredibly hot day, feeling the sun beating down on me. Both projects, nearing completion and with deadlines looming, were in jeopardy due to factors beyond my control, and I remember wondering why I didn’t feel more stressed by this situation. It was as if a blanket of calm had descended over me. For some time I had been working relentlessly, sleeping far too little and pushing myself to my physical and mental limits; yet that day I felt as if both I and the world around me were operating in slow motion, and ‘all was well’. I now know that at the time I was in the first trimester of pregnancy, and so my body was flooded with the hormone progesterone, which acts as a sedative with powerful tranquillising and hypnotic effects.3

In retrospect, the two works that I was creating seem connected with the process that you and I, at that point unwittingly, were jointly engaged in. **Dayglass** (2002; see figs. 1 & 2, overleaf), created for Sculpture by the Sea 2002, clearly referenced time, and especially waiting, in that it was based on the traditional timing device of an hourglass (or egg timer!). Scaled up both physically and chronologically, it approximated the proportions of both the human body, and the 24-hr day that governs our lives. Was I, through the changes in my body and hormones, already waiting, day by day, for you to arrive?4

A traditional hourglass is thoroughly self-contained, its sand emptying from one glass bulb into the other, and back again, ad infinitum. In my model, however, I recreated only half of the typical blown glass vessel, leaving an open neck above the traditional ‘waist’; therefore the falling sand cascaded slowly back onto the beach from which it had been removed, and was reabsorbed. Applied to human relations, this reabsorption challenges the Western metaphysical view of the self as autonomous, independent and...  

4 Ruddick, in her investigation of “natal thinking”, describes pregnancy as characterised by a very particular “active, receptive” type of waiting. (Ruddick, “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth,” p. 42.)
omnipotent. It suggests, rather, an unavoidable interdependence between human beings, and an arbitrary, or fluid, nature to the boundaries between what is considered to be ‘public’ and ‘private’, ‘self’ and ‘other’.⁵

Dayglass also alluded to the simultaneous and intertwined passage of personal and collective time and, as the vessel emptied each day, hinted at human mortality.

The scaling up of the hourglass to not much over human height compounded these references to the human condition, while the generously proportioned

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⁵ Feminist art historian and theorist Rosemary Betterton describes the female body as having long been represented as “a sealed vessel” (for example, the ‘Virgin Mother’). She cites Lynda Nead’s argument that one of the principal functions of the female nude in western art has been “containment and regulation of the female sexual body”, and argues that the maternal body potentially disrupts the boundary between nature and culture in that it “points to the impossibility of closure, to a liminal state where the boundaries of the body are fluid.” (Rosemary Betterton, An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists, and the Body, London; New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 33.)
glass vessel tapering to a tiny ‘neck’ could, in turn, be read as analogous to a pregnant womb; and the revision of the hourglass into a vessel that daily spilled its contents, necessitating refilling, can also be read as a reference. It evokes, for me, a transition from believing in the self as singular and self-contained to my realisation, through your (then) impending birth via my cervix, and my subsequent experiences as a mother, that the individual is not self-sufficient but inherently relational, constantly involved in an interdependent process of emptying and refilling from a shared ‘pot’.

The huge glass vessel did not, of course, refill itself each day; neither was filling it as simple as transferring sand from the beach each morning. Sand damp with morning dew, or containing detritus from the beach, would quickly jam the tiny neck of the vessel; consequently I spent countless hours both before and during the exhibition sorting, drying, sifting, hauling, storing and later returning sand by the sackload, to haul six sacks, one by one, up a ladder each morning and empty them into the vessel. At the time I felt a certain irony in comparing the apparent simplicity of this task (after all, the work was surrounded by sand!) with the actual labour required – an irony often felt by artists creating laborious or time-consuming works that give an impression of elegant simplicity. In retrospect I find that this irony parallels mothering, not only in the physical toil and bearing of weight (this parallel is both literal and also metaphorical, representing the weight of responsibility involved in mothering), but also in that I managed to make the process appear effortless to all but those few early risers who saw me sweating under sackload after sackload of sand.⁶

The performance/installation work Untitled 2002 (2002; see figs. 3 & 4, overleaf), created at the same time as Dayglass, can, in retrospect, also be seen to reference aspects of pregnancy and the transition to being a mother.

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⁶ Maushart describes how, and questions why, mothers not only accept but also further promulgate the socially constructed mask handed to them, carefully glossing over their own insecurities, fears and struggles. “In the end … we put on the Mask of Motherhood and make it all look so easy.” (Maushart, op. cit. p. 60.)
Figs. 3 & 4. *Untitled 2002* (seen from opposite sides of the wall), Helen Sturgess, 2002.

*It addresses a number of interrelated concerns, including: objectification of the female body, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and the Cartesian representation of the mind and body as essentially separate, with mind privileged over body.*

*In this work three cylindrical chambers were located vertically one above another, within a column that was set into a partition wall built perpendicular to an existing wall. Whilst the column was stationary, the chambers rotated very slowly, displaying their contents (turned by a motor concealed beneath the bottom chamber). The chambers were each open on one side only, so that the top and bottom chambers were effectively in one room and the middle chamber in the other. In one room, the top chamber contained my head, arms and shoulders, and viewers were able to talk with me; the bottom chamber contained my legs and feet. The chamber in the other room, therefore, contained my torso. My body passed through the bases of the higher two chambers, and these bases turned with me; thus the contents of each chamber were totally hidden from viewers on the other side of the wall.*
Looking back at documentary video shot a few days after the first performance of Untitled 2002, my abdomen appears slightly swollen. The day after shooting this video I took time to check on a growing (although barely conscious) suspicion, and discovered that I was nearly three months pregnant. The video gives witness to your (at the time not fully perceived) presence within me as I gave that performance.

I can also look back and find your presence, as ‘the desired child’, in an earlier work, Emerge (2001; see fig. 5, overleaf). Initially inspired by musing on cell division, I envisaged a smooth, bulging form that would well up out of a corner, as if from nowhere, seemingly ‘growing’. I imagined this form splitting repeatedly to replicate itself, like a spore; in retrospect, however, the glowing salmony pinkness I sought to achieve as the project developed speaks clearly of a Caucasian baby’s flesh.

Rather than attempt to carve or mould this welling shape, I decided to try to create it using plumbers’ expanding foam. Squirted into a mould in the shape of a right-angled corner, the foam did as I had expected, welling up like bread in the oven (the proverbial bun?). The shape, the form, was exactly as I had imagined – yet it appeared lifeless. I tried painting the foam surface in fleshy tones, but still did not achieve the effect that I wanted. I realised that I wanted the form to glow from within, to suggest the presence of ‘life’. A process of experimentation and consultation led to the choice of semi-opaque blown glass, illuminated internally. Gravity was used during the blowing process to cause the glass to ‘well up’ as desired. With a power source hidden within the form, the object could sit in a right-angled corner such as the corner of a room and appear to have welled up ‘out of the blue’.

Many times since your birth I have gazed at your face, sleeping or in action, and felt that it had an interior glow, a wondrous radiation, akin to the glow I worked so hard to create. Perhaps this can be explained merely as the glow of healthy young skin, but I feel there is more to it, something beyond, or other
Fig. 5. *Emerge*, Helen Sturgess, 2001.

than, the physical, the visual. I wonder if this ‘glow’ exists, not exactly in you, but in the space between us, created by the love that I feel for you, and your reciprocation of my love.

As I write, six years after creating *Emerge*, you are four years old. There was no miracle, just some discussion of compromises, some sex, some luck (do I believe in it?), a long wait ... and there you were. Here you are. Here we are. I became a mother, I am a mother, I will always be a (your) mother. I have entered “the long gullet”.
Chapter Two:
The Long Gullet - mothering and identity

As a child, walking hand-in-hand with my mother, I would sometimes take a good look at the path ahead, then close my eyes and test how long I could continue walking without either tripping or colliding with something, or becoming so overwhelmed with fear that I had to open them.

Many years later, as a young adult, I witnessed a demonstration of 'firewalking' – walking on glowing hot coals. Onlookers were invited to participate, and instructed how to do so safely. After listening carefully I lined up, reasoning that, as I had seen a number of people walk across the coals without injury, it was less difficult than it appeared. As I had expected, I completed the walk unharmed.

At the beginning of my pregnancy I regarded mothering much as I had firewalking, deriving confidence from the number of survivors in evidence. However, as my body expanded and your birth loomed something bigger, both physically and metaphorically, came into view. I gradually became aware that having a child was not a distinct temporal experience – i.e. that after giving birth one did not merely carry on with life more or less 'as normal'. Through a series of experiences and encounters, particularly with the variously pitying, encouraging and smug attitudes of a number of 'already-parents', I realised that the birth of a child was a watershed in life, a high wall over which one could not peek, but only jump, a point of no return so decisive that it seemed as if the 'becoming-parents' were projected into another dimension unknown to their childless friends. I became aware that there was an awful lot ahead of us (particularly for me, the becoming-mother), and also that most of it was utterly unimaginable
until it became manifest. I was closing my eyes and walking ahead, but along a path I’d never seen before – and with no-one holding my hand.

Philosopher Julia Kristeva describes mothering as entailing a loss of identity. I argue that this perception of loss stems from an inadequate definition of identity, one that assumes autonomy of the ‘self’. I posit that this ‘lost’ identity never truly existed, as it was defined by men, in denial of the realities of most women’s lives. Author Toni Morrison, in contrast, describes becoming a mother as “the most liberating thing that ever happened”, as her children made demands that were totally new to her – to “be a good manager ... have a sense of humour ... deliver something that somebody else could use” – ignoring the things that other people were usually interested in, such as her appearance. “I could not only be me – whatever that was – but somebody actually needed me to be that.”

Since the industrial revolution the prevalent Western metaphysical model of identity has been individualism, featuring an autonomous individual subject characterised by self-determination and by a hierarchy of mind over body. However, examination of this model against a range of people might, I suggest, show it to most closely represent a healthy, employed, partnered adult white male in a Western culture. As DiQuinzio puts it, “individualism defines subjectivity in terms that are derived from or based on situations and experiences more typical of men than of women.” The supposed autonomy of that white male can then be shown to be a fallacy, an illusion, propped up by an unacknowledged dependence on largely unrecognised and undervalued caring and relational activities predominantly carried out by women – child bearing and rearing, looking after the old and infirm, maintaining social networks, carrying out menial yet essential tasks, and so on.

8 Toni Morrison, as cited by Bassin, Honey and Kaplan, op. cit. p. 2.
9 DiQuinzio, op. cit. p. xiii.
Maushart describes the enormous levels of responsibility and commitment involved in mothering as “the non-negotiable terms of a biosocial contract into which one does not so much enter as tumble headlong”,\(^\text{10}\) highlighting not only the scale of the experience, but also its incompatibility with Western models of identity based on self-determination and autonomy.

**Relinquishing the illusion of control**

As a teenager I was a keen marathon canoeist, racing over long distances on essentially still stretches of water. One day I tried my hand at the quite different discipline of white-water canoeing. In some trepidation I set off down a turbulent river. Approaching the first set of rapids, I took my paddles out of the water whilst considering which route forwards would be the safest. The sound of my mother screaming “Paddle, Helen, paddle!” from the bank accompanied a jolting realisation that in this kind of river the canoe did not stop when you did – it kept on going. Before I had time to think, I was at the bottom of the set of rapids and heading for the next.

The lack of what is viewed as an acceptable level of self-control begins to surface during pregnancy, when hormonal and physical changes can bring on strange and unexpected emotions, sensations and cravings, but comes abruptly to a head during the birth process. Maushart describes how, in a culture that puts great emphasis on the need and ability of an individual to control their own life, giving birth comes as a shocking surprise. Antenatal classes, books and so on can serve to bolster the delusion that adequate planning will ensure a calm, organised and relatively trouble-free ‘delivery’ – whilst in reality the birth process is overwhelming, unpredictable, inexorable, and characterised by lack of control. During her own first birthing experience, Maushart says, she soon realised that “[s]omething larger and infinitely more

\(^{10}\) Maushart, op. cit. p. 8.
powerful than myself was pulling the strings”, and that therefore the “only way to gain control is to lose it” – a terrifying proposition for most of us.

During your birth I reached a point that I considered to be unacceptably painful. I yelled to the midwife, my partner and anyone else who happened to be within earshot, “I can’t do this!” – to which the midwife, with a slightly irritating grin, replied, “It’s a bit late to decide that!”

Pregnancy and motherhood are not unlike paddling on white water – you might make your own, considered decision to get into the water, but from that moment on you are carried inexorably from one set of rapids to the next. Stopping to think is rarely an option; most thinking must be done ‘on the go’. You can pick your course, to some extent, but often the current is too strong to be resisted, and all you can do is hang on to the paddles and try to stay upright. And you can never, never turn and head back upstream.

Anna Maria Dell’oso describes a birthing mother as being digested in the “long gullet” of labour, saying that “Once a woman steps into the great gullet, once she is squeezed in there by the big fist, something must be spat out, an outcome which is never any less than life or death.” Her words evoke not only the very visceral nature of the birth process, but also its existential enormity.

The term ‘long gullet’, although coined by Dell’oso to describe the chronologically circumscribed experience of giving birth, could be extended to the longitudinal process of mothering. The loss – or lack – of control experienced by a mother during birth continues throughout the mothering process. The profound dependence of a human baby, usually on its mother, means that she is no longer responsible for only her own safety and wellbeing, but also for that of her child, and can therefore no longer see herself as an

‘individual’ in the Western metaphysical sense. A perceptual shift must occur; rather than viewing the individual as autonomous, a mother must in some sense accept the unavoidable dependence that characterises human existence. As a child grows and develops this dependence upon the mother shifts and loosens. Yet by this time, I would argue, the intersubjective nature of human existence has been incorporated into the mother’s very being, and she can never revert to the assumptions and habits of her childless days. And, echoing the one-way nature of pregnancy, although one can become a mother, one can then never cease to be one; a child changes into an adult, yet his/her mother remains just that. As I once heard my own mother telling my mystified two-year-old daughter, “Your Mama will always be my little girl.”

Even the death of an adult ‘child’ does not release its mother from the ‘long gullet’. In human relations the past is never dead and gone. Hirsch describes Beloved, the murdered baby in Morrison’s novel, as “the past that persists in the present”, quoting Beloved’s mother Sethe as saying “All of it is now it is always now.”13 This persistence of mothering beyond death can be seen in the life and work of Käthe Kollwitz (see Chapter Three, pp. 42-46).

**Autonomy vs intersubjectivity**

_You were born into water, in a sliding rush, then lifted and placed in my arms by eager hands. I looked into your face ... and was unexpectedly surprised to find myself looking at someone that I had never seen before. I didn’t know you! It was not that I expected to recognise you – I just hadn’t thought about it during my pregnancy, about how I would meet this brand-new little person, complete within yourself, and would set about getting to know you._

_I wonder what impact that first gaze had on you. Mine was the first face you looked into, mine were the first eyes you met. I came to this_  

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meeting complete with my own set of preconceptions about the world, society, personal relationships ... yet also torn asunder, rendered raw, by the enormity, the newness, the incomparability of the birth experience, and so, in some ways, as fresh and new as you. I feel privileged to have been the object of your first visual contact with another human.

Mothering is intrinsically relational; as sociologist and author Steph Lawler points out, the social category of ‘mother’ “is constituted in relation to the prior category ‘child’: what children are considered to need for development is used to define ‘good mothering.’” To be a ‘good’ mother, then, one must to some extent relinquish one’s assumption of autonomy and adapt to behave in a relational manner.

However, our society views independence as being concordant with full identity, leaving mothers torn between being ‘good’, and being accepted as full members of the society in which they live. And as ‘bad’ mothering is unacceptable within this same society, mothers, whether good or bad, can never be fully accepted as individuals. As Rich says, “under patriarchy, the mother’s life is exchanged for the child’s; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear.”

Undervalued

Many women report feeling undervalued, or ignored, once they become mothers. American journalist Ann Crittenden describes her own experience at a Washington, D.C. cocktail party. Asked by other guests what she did, she reports that “I replied that I was a new mother, and they promptly vanished.” Noting that the same people might have found her worth talking to had she replied that she was a foreign correspondent for *Newsweek,* a financial reporter for *The New York Times,* or a Pulitzer prize nominee, she was left to

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14 Lawler, op. cit. p. 4.
reflect that on becoming a mother she had “shed status like the skin off a snake.” Later, after resigning from The New York Times to spend more time with her infant son, she ran into someone who asked her “Didn’t you used [sic?] to be Ann Crittenden?”16 In becoming a mother Crittenden had, perhaps unwittingly, crossed a watershed – from being accepted as an autonomous individual to being perceived as less than whole, in that a mother is seen as accommodating her child within herself, as giving up part of herself, her individuality, to be a mother.

There is a popular proverb, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.”17 Contemporary society, however, as Maushart observes, lacks a supportive network of extended family and social obligations. Therefore, she says, it leaves a new mother, having up until then taken autonomy for granted, no choice but to struggle “to fit two people into a space formerly reserved for one.”18 Crittenden, writing critically about this phenomenon, apparently did not see herself as less of a person, less ‘herself’; however many women do report feelings of loss of self, of confusion regarding their identity, on becoming mothers.

My own sensation of identity loss persists, four years after your birth, and despite my assertions to the contrary. Your birth stands as a watershed in my life, and your continuing existence has become inextricably interwoven with my own. Days after your birth someone said to me “Your daughter is a lovesong that will play in your heart for the rest of your life.” These words ring true, and more – from before you were born your presence has been a part of me, an ineradicable component of my makeup. I do not mean to imply that I am no longer

16 Crittenden, op. cit. pp. 11-12.
17 I have been unable to identify the origins of this proverb, widely assumed to be African, although sometimes attributed to Native Americans or even to a Chicago-based NGO in the 1980s. It was first popularised in Western culture by Ted Kennedy and later by Hillary Clinton. For more on this proverb visit: http://www.h-net.org/~africa/threads/village.html
who I was, I am no less ‘me’, but rather, I am more me – there is more to me – your presence in my life adds and informs, rather than taking away from who I already was before you came into being. This presence, further, has caused an ongoing, probably endless process of reassessment of my own ways of being in this world, and of other relationships in my life, throwing new light on my childhood and relationships within my own family, and the new, nuclear family your birth crystallised. As you grow and develop, new issues and challenges continually arise. Yet when I mention you in a social situation, I often feel that by doing so I am erasing some of my own individuality, somehow ‘reducing’ my identity. Although intellectually I reject the notion that I am ‘less’ as a result of your birth, I cannot fully extricate myself from the cultural hegemony that tells me that this is the case.

Mothering as intellectually transformative

Ruddick details how Western philosophers don’t represent mothers as thinking people. She argues that within the Western canon ‘rational’ thinking is explicitly and metaphorically contrasted with, and considered superior to, “the kinds of particularity, passionate attachment, and bodily engagement expressed in mothering.” She describes how, after the birth of her first child, she could only imagine herself thinking when she was not “being a mother” but was “at work”.19 She felt that “to be a person meant fitting childcare into the interstices of Interesting Work”, yet the richness of her emotional life made the academic sphere in which she worked seem like “a flattened version of elementary school.”20 Investigating the physical engagement that, beginning in pregnancy, extends throughout the mothering process, Ruddick adapts Irigaray and Braidotti to represent “the knowing self – the “ego” – as in the first instance, and to a degree always, a bodily ego”, quoting Braidotti’s

stipulation that this means “recognising the “primacy of the bodily roots of subjectivity” and therefore identifying “the body” as a site of knowledge”.

Thus, according to Ruddick, experiences often considered merely physical may actually be “intellectually transformative”. She describes the ‘bodily ego’ as “thoroughly social ... constituted in and constructed by relationships in which “the body” is held, touched, spoken to, heard, frightened, soothed, hurt, and comforted”.21

Given, then, the unavoidable and intense ‘social physicality’ of the reciprocal experiences of mothering and being mothered, they cannot but have a huge impact on this ‘bodily ego’. According to Maushart, society in general maintains a pretence that mothering is a simple, calm, unremarkable, clearly defined process warranting lots of action but little complex thought. In contrast, she describes mothering as “[t]his heroic journey, this steepest of learning curves, this drama of birth and rebirth”, concluding that “whatever fine metaphors we choose to dress it up in, the processes entailed in mothering children lie at the very core of what it is to be human”.22 Maushart quotes Kathryn Rabuzzi, “[i]f a society existed in which the way of the mother were the norm, tales of mothers would predominate the way tales of heroes do in cultures throughout the world”,23 and seeks to reassure mothers that their fears, frustrations and confusions stem not from their own incompetence, but from a “legacy of unworkable social structures and contradictory cultural demands”.24

As a young woman author Sarah Dowse imagined that giving birth was “incidental, almost irrelevant to the achievements of the intellect, to industry, commerce, or politics”.25 Now, as a grandmother, however, she insists that

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21 Ruddick, “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth”, p. 41.
22 Maushart, op. cit. p. 34.
23 Kathryn Rabuzzi, as cited in ibid.
24 ibid. p. 17.
25 Sarah Dowse, "Connections around Childbirth" in Adelaide, op. cit. p. 120.
mothering, as “the ultimate act of human achievement”, should be seen as the foreground for these achievements, a “central, revelatory event”.26

Changing the horizon itself

In her book *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity within History* philosopher Luce Irigaray argues that until the “objective rights of the female gender”27 have been identified and legal systems adapted accordingly, freedom to live “an identity in feminine mode”28 is not possible. She demands laws “appropriate to female identity”, and exposes Western governments as being unwilling to introduce such laws.29 Irigaray does not underestimate the magnitude of such a shift, saying that it is not a matter of making small changes “within a horizon already defined as human culture”, but of understanding the theoretical and practical fallacies inherent in our interpretation of human identity, and changing “the horizon itself” accordingly.30

Irigaray is not alone in acknowledging that the realities of female identity must be recognised if women are to live as free and whole citizens. Iris Marion Young, in *On Female Body Experience* (2004), proposes a “different philosophical framework arising from … female embodiment”31 and Christine Battersby, in *The Phenomenal Woman* (1998), singles out as a starting point for this framework the experience of “a body that is capable of generating a new body from within its ‘own’ flesh”.32

26 ibid. p. 120.
28 ibid. p. 34. As regards choosing whether to have children, Anne Summers and Leslie Cannold have both specifically examined the options open to women in Australia today, and conclude that, in Cannold’s words, “the circumstances many contemporary women face severely restrict their freedom to choose when, and whether, to mother.” (Cannold, *What, No Baby?*, p. 26; Summers, *The End of Equality.* )
30 ibid. p. 20.
32 Battersby, op. cit. p. 6.
Battersby questions what would happen if personal and individual identity were remodelled in female terms, taking seriously the idea that “a ‘person’ could normally, at least always potentially, become two”. 33 According to Young, this starting point acknowledges “that the subject lives as flesh, and that there are inevitable dependencies between self and other”, engendering “power inequalities that cannot be abolished but should be acknowledged” in order that each individual be accorded due respect. 34

Battersby shows how this approach to identity elides the gap between ‘self’ and ‘other’, as it posits a self that is “scored by relationality … the ‘other’ is within, as well as without”. 35 As Rich observes, the child that she carries for nine months “can be defined neither as me nor as not-me. Far from existing in the mode of ‘inner space’, women are powerfully and vulnerably attuned both to “inner” and “outer” because for us the two are continuous, not polar.” 36

DiQuinzio, in *The Impossibility of Motherhood* (1999), coins the term “essential motherhood” to represent an ideological model that identifies certain attributes as essential to motherhood, and “articulates femininity in terms of motherhood so understood” 37 – that is, maintains that this particular definition of motherhood is natural and inevitable for all women. 38 She demonstrates how essential motherhood, in requiring that all women mother, yet defining

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33 ibid. p. 2.
34 Young, loc. cit.
36 Rich, op. cit. p. 64. It surely follows that, as Ruddick claims, there is inherent in maternal thinking, i.e. “the thinking that grows out of the work mothers do” (Ruddick, Maternal Thinking, unpaginated (text on front cover), a striving for peaceful, nonviolent solutions that, if recognised as specific and valuable, could inform world politics and undermine the political and social structures that currently maintain power inequalities.
37 DiQuinzio, op. cit. p. xiii.
38 This definition of motherhood holds, in short, that all women are psychologically and emotionally predisposed to, and therefore want to and should, be mothers; and that the primary goal of women’s sexuality is motherhood (thus requiring their heterosexuality).
'motherhood' "in terms that are at odds with subjectivity as individualism defines it ... exclud[es] mothers and women from individualist subjectivity." \textsuperscript{39}

DiQuinzio goes on to agree with Irigaray, Battersby and Young that, in order to allow subjectivity for women, whether mothers or not, a different theory of subjectivity is needed, recognising subjectivity as “partial, divided, and fragmentary”.\textsuperscript{40} Until such a theory is established, a mother’s experience cannot but involve conflict. The disjunction between her own experiences and societal expectations can lead to her juggling multiple, conflicting perspectives on her own identity. And as journalist Therese Taylor, reporting on a symposium held to explore the topic of “Mothering as an inspiration for art”, points out, mothers who are artists can find themselves in a double bind: “What mothers do isn't really work. Sound familiar? How about, What artists do isn't really work? What if you are both?”\textsuperscript{41} As I struggle to find my own voice as both artist and mother, I am drawn to examine the ways in which others approach this dilemma.

\textsuperscript{39} DiQuinzio, loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{40} ibid. p. xvii.
\textsuperscript{41} Therese Taylor, "Mothering as an Inspiration for Art (Symposium About Mothers and Artists)", \textit{Horizons}, v14, no. 1, 2000. (Accessed online at http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-584385_ITM, 26/10/07.)
Chapter 3:  
Just about a Woman and her Baby – combining mothering and art

The experience of pregnancy, giving birth and mothering is vast, life-changing and existentially challenging. The body of one individual opens to release that of another. The new baby, having been totally dependent on its mother up until that moment, takes its first breath – setting in motion a continually negotiated balance between care-taking and ‘growing up’, as the mother carefully fosters her child’s progress towards independence.

Nicolas Bourriaud, in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), describes contemporary art as “formed by intersubjectivity”, with each artist dwelling in “the circumstances the present offers him [sic]”. Art must, then, arise out of the interstices, the bonds between people; and what interpersonal space could be richer, denser, more complex than that between mother and child? An artist critically and creatively exploring her own experience of being a mother is working, as it were, at the coalface, mining her own personal experience of intersubjectivity.

Yet having children has, for women, long been thought to preclude being an artist. German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) studied at a time when women were not allowed to attend German art academies, but only the Women’s Schools of Art recently annexed to some of them. In her first class in Munich the presence of an engagement ring on her finger led to a heated debate amongst the other students, for whom celibacy was an accepted imperative. Marriage was regarded as a betrayal of artistic ambitions; it was  

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43 ibid. p. 13.
considered impossible to be a wife and mother (it was assumed that every married woman would have children) and pursue an artistic career.\textsuperscript{44}

Kollwitz, however, went on to show that she, at least, could do it. Indeed many years later, when she was free of her child-rearing activities, she mused that although she spent more time in the studio, “[p]erhaps in reality I “accomplish” little more. ... Formerly in my so wretchedly limited working time, I was more productive because I was more sensual: I lived as a human being must live, passionately interested in everything.”\textsuperscript{45} Thus Kollwitz, in the words of feminist art historian Rosemary Betterton, represented “maternal subjectivity ... as the \textit{condition} of artistic production rather than, as contemporary discourses insisted, its very antithesis.”\textsuperscript{46}

Some women feel a need to keep their art and their mothering separate. When Rich’s children were young she was often asked why she didn’t write poetry about them. She says that “poetry was where I lived as no one’s mother, where I existed as myself.”\textsuperscript{47} Many women, though, do make art about their experiences of mothering; indeed, some feel compelled to do so.

Mary Kelly’s \textit{Post-Partum Document} (1973-76;\textsuperscript{48} see figs. 6-9, overleaf) must be seen in the context of this paper as an anchor or ground, a point from which other work approaching the topic of mothering stems or is judged. Kelly’s longitudinal project, “conceived as an ongoing process of analysis and visualisation of the mother-child relationship”,\textsuperscript{49} is widely recognised as a seminal work, and I have spent a considerable amount of my research time examining and analysing it. However, I found that the complex nature of this

\textsuperscript{44} Martha Kears, \textit{Käthe Kollwitz: Woman and Artist}, New York: The Feminist Press, 1976, pp. 36-42.
\textsuperscript{46} Betterton, op. cit. p. 45.
\textsuperscript{47} Rich, op. cit. p. 31.
\textsuperscript{48} The six sections were compiled 1973-76, and the bound presentation published in 1983.
work precluded any brief summing-up, and my paper became disproportionately weighted towards it. After much agonising I relegated my examination of *Post-Partum Document*, all 1,202 words of it, to an appendix (see pp. 68-71). This has allowed me to include a selection of other artists in

whose works, experiences and reflections I find resonance with my own. Kelly’s work, however, remains significant for me, having introduced the subjective experience of mothering to an art world that, at the time, saw it as irrelevant, if not completely incompatible with serious artistic practice.

In her foreword to Kelly’s *Document* feminist art critic and theorist Lucy Lippard describes Kelly’s “courageous stand against the cultural repression of the mother/child experience” in braving the initial (and presumably predictable) widespread rejection of the work as "just about a woman and her baby, thereby no fit subject for high culture."

A contemporary of Kelly, Mierle Laderman Ukeles became internationally recognised as a pioneer performance artist through her collaborations with the New York City Department of Sanitation, in which she shook the hands of every single worker and followed them through their daily tasks. The first, less well-known series of performances in her body of work that she termed *Maintenance Art*, however, titled *Washing, Tracks, Maintenance* (1973; see figs. 10 & 11, overleaf), developed out of consideration of the vital yet tedious ‘maintenance tasks’ involved in mothering. In these eight-hour performances at an art museum Ukeles spent up to four hours at a time engaged in tasks such as scrubbing the museum’s steps, or its gallery floors. In doing so she foregrounded the daily tasks of its maintenance staff, hidden and devalued tasks that parallel those usually carried out by women in the domestic sphere – such as cleaning, washing, dusting and tidying; and in doing so Ukeles, in the words of Miwon Kwon, “posed the museum as a hierarchical system of labor relations”, complicating “the social and gendered division between the notions of the public and the private”.

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51 Ibid.
Ukeles had made a conscious decision five years earlier to choose her maternal work as the material from which she would make art.\textsuperscript{54} This decision stemmed from a shocking experience in which her male art school mentor, learning that she was pregnant, proclaimed in front of the class, “Well, Mierle, I guess you know you can’t be an artist now.”\textsuperscript{55} Ukeles says that “[t]here were no words for my life. I was split into two people, artist and mother. I was in a fury.”\textsuperscript{56} It seems that although having a husband or partner (now that marriage and cohabitation had become less binding arrangements) was no longer seen as precluding an artistic career for a woman, maternity remained an insurmountable obstacle.

\textsuperscript{55} Andrea Liss, “Interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles”, May 19, 2000. As cited in ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} ibid.
And to this day, despite the stands taken by Kelly and Ukeles, mothering is still relatively invisible in ‘the art world’. The traditional image, or myth, of the artist is an extension of the prevalent Western metaphysical view of the self as autonomous: locked in a lonely garret, he works feverishly away without interruption; thus there seems to be a hegemonic assumption that you cannot be a ‘serious’ artist if you have a child (that is, if you are female).

When I discovered that I was pregnant with you I was due to go to Berlin to study under Rebecca Horn for three months, over the period in which you would be born. I applied to defer the study exchange, and in contrast with Ukeles’ experience, was told “Just go! You can give birth there.” This confidence in my ability to adapt and cope was flattering, but on the other hand I was shocked that being pregnant wasn’t considered reasonable justification for deferment.

I reapplied for the exchange the following year, and we arrived in Berlin when you were 10 months old. My studies were soon interrupted, however, when you succumbed to a fairly serious illness. Just as you were recovering we received a phonecall telling us that your Grandfather had only weeks to live, and we left Berlin to be with him. On taking leave of Rebecca she hugged me and said “Go back to Australia and look after your baby.” She made no mention of my art practice, and I understood her to be implying that I had to make a choice – either look after you, or make art; or rather that, by having you, I had already made that choice.

Rich, writing about her struggle to combine mothering and writing, describes the following cycle. Whilst with any one of her sons, a move on her part “not even physically, but in spirit” away from the tightly circumscribed life that they shared seemed to trigger an imperative in the child to become more demanding, to insert himself both physically and emotionally between her and her work, “as if my placenta had begun to refuse him oxygen.” She recalls “an
inequality between us, my needs always balanced against those of a child, and always losing.”

French impressionist Berthe Morisot (1841-95) had earlier resolved this struggle in accordance with the customs of her culture, time and class. The subject of her work *The Wet Nurse* (1880; see fig. 12) is engaged in breastfeeding the artist’s baby daughter.

![Fig. 12. *The Wet Nurse*, Berthe Morisot, 1879.](image-url)

Morisot was presumably employing the wet-nurse so that she could continue her career unhampered by her child’s demands; as Morisot painted, this unnamed woman fulfilled one of the most intimate tasks we associate with mothering, feeding the child from her own breasts. Academic and author Mary Jacobus suggests that, for Morisot, “looking substitutes for nursing and painting supplements maternal nurture”, and that *The Wet Nurse* thus undermines “any reassuring representation of primary maternal preoccupation”.

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Installation artist Monica Bock searches for a contemporary solution to Rich’s dilemma, saying that after having children it became imperative to make art with and about them,

in order to process and make my reality known, but also to stay close to my children even though half the time the work required me to take a step away. It was and is for me a kind of complex and conflicted nurturing with reflection upon nurturing ...\(^{59}\)

Working at the point where mothering and career intersect, Bock investigates the emotions and conflicts that arise for both her and her children. The resulting body of work parallels the shifting of the maternal focus over time. Bock’s *Afterbirth* series arises out of birth, an event that reveals the blurred boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’ and heralds the emergence of the mother-child dyad, an essentially private relationship. The later work *Maternal Exposure: Don’t Forget the Lunches ...* (2000; see figs. 13 & 14, below and overleaf), in contrast, references the daily contact that Bock’s children have with the outside, ‘public’ world.

Fig. 13. *Maternal Exposure: Don’t Forget the Lunches ...*, Monica Bock, 1999-2000.

\(^{59}\) Monica Bock, "Benton Museum Faculty Exhibition Talk", Fall 2003. (As emailed to me by the artist, 30/08/06.)
In this work Bock presents 418 lead sheet bags embossed with the lunch menus that she packed for her children in the course of a year. These bags spread across the floor in the order in which the original lunches were prepared, whilst 88 small lead plaques interspersed amongst them record the sick days, holidays, etc. when no lunches had to be made.

Ever since male and female roles, and the public and private spheres in which they were to be carried out, were polarised by the industrial revolution, mothering has been increasingly defined, scrutinised and regulated from without. Bock describes this work as inspired by the “daily ritual of exposing one's children and one's nurturing skills to public scrutiny.”

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became self conscious [sic] of everything I put in ... bologna is not something perhaps that you are supposed to feed your kids ... I became really interested in my own sense of being watched as a mother. This lunch issue was ... a symptom of a larger set of impossible expectations that is always hovering over [a mother], in terms of how they take care of their kids. How they are supposed to feel about taking care of their kids. What they are supposed to notice ... [and] not notice. How close they are supposed to get or not get. How relentless it basically all is.\textsuperscript{61}

Through documenting a whole year's effort she attempts to reveal “that relentless labor and also the relentless exposure that being a mother entails”, and comments on “the ritual of sending my children out into the world and hoping they might be protected by this little bit of nourishment contained in the lunchbag.”\textsuperscript{62}

Whilst Kollwitz’s work centred on the lives and problems of all working-class Germans, she paid particular attention to mothers, observing their daily struggle to protect their children, and the terrible toll that this often took on them. She had, as her younger sister Lise put it, a lifelong “dialogue with Death”,\textsuperscript{63} and her prolific collection of drawings, etchings, lithographs, woodcuts and sculptures included many depictions of women being claimed by the ‘Grim Reaper’, often whilst sheltering their children in their arms\textsuperscript{64} – for example \textit{Death Seizes a Woman} (1923-4; see fig. 15, overleaf).

Her oeuvre also included many images of mothers grieving over the bodies of their dead children. Her first such image, \textit{Woman with Dead Child} (1903; see fig. 16, p. 44), portraying a woman whose dead son is slipping from her arms, was inspired by the near loss of her older son Hans one night during a serious illness. In a strange twist of fate that Kollwitz herself later

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{61}ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{62}ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{63}From a letter Kollwitz wrote to her sister Lise, dated February 1945. Kollwitz, op. cit. p. 195. \\
\textsuperscript{64}These images serve to illustrate Ruddick’s writings on the specific nature and value of “maternal thinking”, (Ruddick, \textit{Maternal Thinking}) and Meagher and DiQuinzio’s exposure of current attempts to ‘protect’ women and children as restrictive and controlling, leading to their call for the re-conceptualising of need, care and protection as normal (Meagher and DiQuinzio, op. cit. pp. 1-8).
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described as prophetic, however, it was her younger son Peter that she used as a model for this etching, foreshadowing her real loss when he died, aged eighteen, in the First World War.  

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I cannot even begin to imagine how I would feel if you died before me. As you are my only child, the loss would be total. I would be a mother, yet no longer fully one – an empty mother, perhaps, living in a kind of endless limbo. Would my art, and other relationships in my life, combine to fill the gap left by you? I can only guess, and my guess is that, without other children, the loss would remain an open wound until the end of my life.

The horrendous loss of young male lives in this war brought into sharp focus the disjunction between a mother’s desire to protect her offspring and the inherent violence of the male-dominated society for which she
was preparing them. Kollwitz’s mothers defy this seeming inevitability, clutching their children to them. From Peter’s death onwards an apt quote from Goethe, “Seed for the planting shall not be ground up!” is repeated in both her work and her writings.\textsuperscript{66}

The creation of a memorial for Peter, which soon grew into a memorial to all sons lost in war, became Kollwitz’s reason to keep living and working as she struggled to cope with her loss. Taking as many years to complete as Peter had lived,\textsuperscript{67} The Parents\textsuperscript{68} (see figs. 17 & 18), finally erected in the military

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{parents_statue}
\caption{\textit{The Parents}, Käthe Kollwitz, 1932.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{66} This phrase comes from a letter in Goethe’s novel \textit{Wilhelm Meister} (Ibid. p. 66.).
\textsuperscript{67} Although work on the memorial was not begun until 1924, it was first conceived late in 1914, within months of Peter’s death. (Ibid. p. 65.)
\textsuperscript{68} These two statues are also referred to by some sources as \textit{The Mourning Parents}, and separately as \textit{The Mother} and \textit{The Father}, or \textit{The Mourning Mother} and \textit{The Mourning Father}. 
cemetery of Roggevelde in Flanders, Belgium\textsuperscript{69} in 1932, consists of separate, slightly larger-than-life-sized figures of a middle-aged woman and man kneeling in grief.\textsuperscript{70}

Sydney-based sculptor Halin Nieuwenhuyse also considers, in a recent body of work, these issues of violence and war that are particularly relevant to the mother of a son, taking replica guns painstakingly crafted by her teenage son, and covering or embellishing them.

In \textit{Silencer} (2005; see fig. 19), for example, Nieuwenhuyse crochets a fluffy pink cover for a copy of an M16 assault rifle, conflating “the highly gendered activity of war and ... male fascination with weaponry”\textsuperscript{71} with the nurturing and comforting of children by their mothers. In doing so she reminds us, again, that every fallen soldier is somebody’s son.

\textbf{Fig. 19.}\textit{ Silencer}, Halin Nieuwenhuyse, 2005.

Nieuwenhuyse describes this work as “enact[ing] a kind of maternal

\textsuperscript{69}In 1955-57 the Roggevelde soldiers’ cemetery, complete with \textit{The Mourning Parents}, was relocated to the nearby site of Vladsloo-Praeborsch, where they still stand. (Klein and Klein, op. cit. p. 167.)

\textsuperscript{70}The mother’s features are based on Kollwitz’s own (ibid. p. 111), and some sources say that the father closely resembles her husband Karl (ibid. p. 106.)

\textsuperscript{71}From Halin Nieuwenhuyse’s unpublished writing on the work, as emailed to me, 20/10/07.
revenge”. She shows her disapproval of her son’s fascination with war by resorting to the 1950s practice of covering and decorating domestic objects that were considered immodest, such as toilet rolls, tissue boxes etc. Yet in metaphorically rendering the gun safer and more acceptable, ‘defusing’ its phallic potential, she ‘camouflages’ it, creating an uneasy ambiguity.

Another Sydney-based artist, Bronwyn Thompson, also touches on violence, this time the culturally muted violence of the female. In Thompson’s video *I’ll be your girl* (2006; see fig. 20) her young daughter, seen from behind, sits on the edge of a bed, stroking the hair of a smaller figure sitting beside her.

![Image](image.jpg)

Fig. 20. *I’ll be your girl* (video still), Bronwyn Thompson, 2006.

Perhaps initially perceived as another child, lack of motion and response reveal this second figure as inanimate (it is in fact a life-sized doll). Both the relative

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72 ibid.
sizes of, and similarities between, the two figures suggest a caring relationship – mother and daughter, perhaps, or older and younger sisters.

Both girl and doll are naked from the waist up, their long hair cascading down their backs, heightening the sense of intimacy suggested by the bedroom-like setting whilst also introducing a slightly disturbing element of sensuality and voyeurism. The footage is slowed down, emphasising the sensuality of the scene and suggesting a dream-like state, removed from ‘the real world’.

After some time the girl’s gentle stroking turns into violent smacking, jarringly disrupting the caring and sensual mood. As a result of this violence the ‘doll’ is eventually revealed as not only inanimate but limbless, before girl and doll collapse together, and the looped video repeats.

The flip from caring, sensual contact to violence suggests the mutability of intimate human relationships. It particularly evokes, for me, the pent-up frustration and anger often embedded in the mother-child relationship, and the cultural unacceptability of its expression, whilst the positioning of the camera behind the protagonists’ backs, as if they are unaware of being observed, suggests that the violence is hidden, being perpetrated ‘behind closed doors’. Alternatively, the slow-motion could indicate that the violence is imagined, a release of otherwise inexpressible feelings.

When downloading images from my digital camera I am always aware of, and feel slightly guilty about, the ‘artificial’ nature of the family record that I am creating, by selecting certain snapshots to keep and others to discard. Smiling, happy daughter – keep; sulky, uncooperative daughter – discard; friendly, caring mother – keep; impatient, frowning mother – discard; and so on. As Jacqueline Millner writes of I’ll be your girl, Thompson creates a metaphor for “the violence that the image wreaks on the body”, denying the viewer “the anticipated pleasure of this idyllic scene of tender child’s play” and

\[73\] For more on this see Rich, op. cit. pp. 21-25.
Instead highlighting how the image “necessarily reduces and ossifies the infinite complexity of our being from earliest childhood.”

25/07/06 – Whilst reading Monica Bock on how she combines her practice and mothering (pp. 40-42) I received a call from your childcare centre: “Mo has a temperature and a funny red splodge on her forehead, and she says her stomach hurts.” Three hours later, you are sleeping in your bedroom as I resume my work. I’m less focused than at the beginning of this work day, aware that when you wake I’ll have to break off again. It’s not only culture that has trouble merging the identity of mother with any other; it seems to me that to mother well, especially without extended family or other support, other work must, in the end, always be subordinate to, fitted in around, mothering.

As mentioned in my introduction, installation artist Frances Joseph uses patchwork to comment on mothering and “interrupted time”, and is interested in “ways that women in both traditional and modern societies combine creative work and parenting.”

Joseph’s Attached (1997; see fig. 21, overleaf) was made whilst preparing to return to her native New Zealand after spending twenty-five years living overseas. Collaging fabrics of sentimental value from those two-and-a-half decades – including clothes outgrown by her young son, scraps of furnishings that reminded her of particular times and places, and so on – Joseph recreated an aerial image of the agricultural landscape she was returning to. Turning her past into art served as a means to let go of things that she could not bear to just throw away, sending the work ahead “as an introduction, my first ever exhibition in NZ with an object quite literally made up of parts of my past.”

74 Jacqueline Millner, Undercurrent: Helen Pynor and Bronwyn Thompson – catalogue essay.
Patchwork, a medium that can be not only picked up and put down, but also worked on with other people, doesn’t require the “obsessive solitary focus of more heroic art media”; thus it allows, according to Joseph, for the expression of a “language of interruption”.  

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Chapter Four: 
Finding my own Language of Interruption

When I enrolled to study for Honours you were eight months old. At the time I felt a need to assert my identity as both individual and artist, separate from my role as your mother, and imagined that I would make art that was unrelated to mothering you. Surrounded by people encouraging me to “get my life back”, “get some time to myself”, and so on, I assumed that mothering and art would inhabit quite separate spheres in my life. However, during that year my work seemed to be inexorably drawn towards my relationship with you, and experiences and phenomena that had entered, or re-entered, my life as a result of becoming your mother. My experience of mothering worked its way into my art as surely as you often steal, almost unnoticed, into my lap.

The first work I ‘conceived’ after your birth, Sleeping? (2004 - still in progress; see fig. 22, overleaf), was clearly inspired by your presence in my life. Video of your sleeping face is projected onto a white helium balloon. The balloon is anchored in space; thus when a draught catches it, your face disappears. The idea for this work surfaced in my mind during your first real illness, an attack of bronchitis at the tender age of 10 months. Alone with you in a foreign city, I sat up night after night nursing you, painfully aware of your struggle to breathe. During those frightening nights, the tenuousness of a baby’s hold on this mortal coil must have been hovering in the back of my mind like that white balloon. The origin of this work illustrates how art evolves out of life events, and despite – or maybe because of – setbacks and interruptions. Mothering you undeniably limits my working time; yet I, like Kollwitz, find that the responsibilities and tasks that limit my time also provide the very stuff from which my art is made.

76 As a breastfeeding mother I was also advised many times, by other mothers, that I needed to ‘get my breasts back’ ...
The first work completed during my Masters candidature, *Migratory Objects* (2006-07; see fig. 23, overleaf), although not immediately recognisable as such, arose from the intersection of my roles as mother and artist. Utilising the whole gallery yet essentially ‘unlocated’, gauzy ‘beings’, held aloft by helium, hover and sway, migrating slowly throughout the space, influenced by the movements of observers.

This work emerged from the aforementioned *Sleeping?* (2003). Attempting to capture the essence of that as-yet-unrealised work on camera, I had spent a tense couple of hours creating and photographing a mock-up, working with tight constraints on time and equipment use. Later, sitting in my studio with a helium balloon drifting around nearby, I became fascinated by its movement. These days I strive to be as efficient as possible, so that I can juggle working, caring for and spending time with my daughter, the relationship with my

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partner, and so on. The languorous, capricious movements of the balloon struck me as the antithesis of my own trajectory through time and space at this juncture in my life – driven, rapid, angular, economical; and its ephemerality, further frustrating my attempted efficiency, teased and intrigued me.
As I watched an unwittingly suppressed imperative pressed itself insistently into my consciousness. The balloon seemed to embody my need, as an artist, to allow my mind to wander, in order to conceive and develop work. Time spent in this reflective state is surely a requisite for any balanced and productive human existence; however perhaps one of the defining characteristics of the artist is that s/he cannot, or will not, ignore this need – for him/her it is a prime need, basic, absolute.

From this initial observation of the balloon’s movement I developed my first *Migratory Object*, barely clothing the balloon to create an object that referenced (in its height, shape, colour, apparent acquiescence to gravity) an adult human, yet which, on closer observation, teetered on the brink of flight, anchored yet essentially without substance, apparently embodied and yet elusive. As adults we tether ourselves to the ground, weighing ourselves down with possessions and responsibilities. To be lighter than air, to fly or to float, is an eternal dream.

When exhibited, the *Objects* evoke affection and a desire to care in many observers. Some are concerned that the forms might stray, and feel compelled to round them up and ‘protect’ them; others express a longing to embrace the *Objects*, but on doing so find themselves confounded by their essential lack of substance. This intangibility brings to my mind the many paradoxical, conflicting aspects of mothering, with its rich engagement often combined with acute isolation, its emphasis on both care and independence, its ability to evoke extremes of joy and despair, love and hate, its foregrounding of both birth and death, and so on.

Despite their apparent susceptibility to the influence of passersby the *Objects*, resisting pressure to act in any specific manner and continuing in their drifting, unhurried motion, behave like young children immersed in imaginative play, oblivious to adult cares and pressures.
During installation of this work in a city gallery one of the (then seven) Objects ‘escaped’, presumably drawn unnoticed through the open doorway in a slipstream created by passing traffic. With this loss, my attitude towards my ‘creations’ changed radically; in that moment they seemed to shift, as toddlers do, from cute dependents to individuals bent on exerting their own wills. Subsequent days spent sitting the gallery were fraught with the responsibility of minding these wayward ‘offspring’; and even when ‘off duty’ I was tense with the anticipation of a phonecall informing me that another Object had disappeared.

My second major work for Masters is **Wall** (2007; see fig. 24, overleaf). A swing, although at first glance free to move, is actually suspended too close to a wall for all but the most limited movement. Angry marks on the adjacent wall testify to repeated but ineffectual attempts to use the swing for its normal purpose, whilst the height at which the swing is suspended suggests that the frustrated ‘swinger’ is an adult. This work affords a feeling of suffocation and constraint, yet in the context of my research it is not clear who is being constrained, mother or child. Just as it could suggest the futility of trying to continue one’s life as if having a child made no difference, the swing could also represent a young child, crashing repeatedly against imposed constraints – shoes; bedtimes; childcare; the requirement to share toys, treats or parents with others – experiences that often lead young children to hit, or throw themselves against walls or floors.

**Wall (II)** (2007; see fig 25, p. 57) is a video installation created from footage filmed during the making of **Wall**. This looped video projected against a white wall might initially appear to be a repetition of one crash of the swing. Prolonged viewing, however, reveals a subtle chronological narrative. The swing hangs motionless, a shadow alone suggesting the proximity of an otherwise indiscernible wall. Suddenly the swing crashes against this wall, its impact violently demonstrating the wall’s physicality and limiting presence. As one crash follows another the wall becomes subtly more tangible, as the
swing’s rubber seat marks it, creating a pattern of abuse. Eventually the swing dissolves, leaving only the marks it has made on the wall. These marks then also disappear. After some time the swing and pristine wall reappear, and the process begins again.
In *Grounded* (2007; see fig. 26, overleaf) a playground swing set is embedded in the ground; the initial impression that swinging freely is possible, present in *Wall*, is replaced by a crushing inertia. Are the swing seats there under the earth, embedded, as implied by the structure, or do the chains come to impotent ends anchored out of the viewer’s sight? Did the structure sink
into the ground – or quicksand? Or did the ground, over time, somehow rise up and envelop it?

Fig. 26. *Grounded* (sketch), Helen Sturgess, 2007.

In *Trace* (2007; see fig. 27, overleaf) passersby encounter, projected onto a floor, the shadow of a child swinging. All possible reference points (such as variations in the horizontal surface, surrounding scenery, the audio track) have been avoided in, or removed from, the edited video footage, and a horizontal ‘screen’ of sand created to ‘catch’ the projection.

The indistinct, soft-edged nature of the projection, in dim lighting rather than darkness, is intentional, allowing for subtle appraisal of its presence. The rhythmic waxing and waning of light intensity is caused by my accidental use of automatic white balance in the initial filming. As this phenomenon seemed to accentuate the effect of the repetitive motion, with the machine’s struggle to ‘balance’ the incident light mirroring the ‘homing’ of any pendulum towards a stationary centre, I decided not to reshoot the footage.
The ephemeral vision is perhaps evocative of the slight traces that we leave as we pass through time and space, or of the traces of childhood that we carry forward with us into our adult lives.

These four swing-based works interrelate and overlap in a number of ways. *Grounded* and *Wall*, both referencing movement yet characterised by solidity and stillness, provide a counterbalance to both the movement and the ephemerality inherent in *Wall (II)* and in *Trace*. *Grounded* and *Trace* share an element of ‘lack’ – in *Grounded* the swing, and in *Trace* the swinging child, is implied by its absence.

*Wall, Wall (II)* and *Grounded* combine with *Migratory Objects* to summarise the internal conflicts that I am experiencing in trying to continue my artistic practice as a mother, attempting to reconcile, as Bock puts it, “two problematic identities”. 77

*Trace* is to me a moment of peace, of reflection, affording the same calming effect that the rocking motion of a crib, or of its mother’s arms, has on a small child.

The swing has featured often in my work over the last few years. In affording soothing motion, but also the opportunity to experience fear and display daring, the swing provides markers for both ends of childhood. It parallels the comforting rocking that assures a baby of its parent’s necessary presence, yet

77 Bock, "Benton Museum Faculty Exhibition Talk".
also allows the risk-taking and self-challenging that are vital to a child’s passage into the relative self-reliance of adulthood. Herbert Marcuse describes art as involving “a suspension of the rules that govern daily life, a denial of gravity”. In my attempt to discover my own language of interruption, the swing represents the potential to momentarily leave the gravitational field of day-to-day existence that is offered by art.

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Conclusion

It is with reservation that I attempt to construct a ‘conclusion’ for this paper, this research, this – to quote Mary Kelly – “project called motherhood”. I am suspicious of neat, Hollywood-style endings. There is no more an end in sight than there ever was for Käthe Kollwitz; mothering never really ends, and nor does being an artist. Both tend to defy neat categorisation, and necessitate a blurring of boundaries – between private and public, reason and emotion.

However, whilst writing this text I became aware of different tendencies in my written and studio work. The observations and reflections on mothering that I was choosing to recount in the written paper are largely positive – filled with love, wonder and joy – despite the fact that mothering, like any intimate relationship, elicits the full gamut of emotions. In my studio work, in contrast, ‘negative’ emotions and mind-states – anger, frustration, depression – predominate. For some time this was a source of worry for me. Was I less happy to be a mother than I thought? Were the emotions expressed in my work the ‘true’ ones, and those in my writing a façade?

I found an answer to these questions in Adrienne Rich’s foreword to Of Woman Born. Rich reveals that she avoided looking back at pregnancy, the births of her children and their dependent years until that period of her life was firmly behind her, as she didn’t feel strong enough to return to the “most painful, incomprehensible, and ambiguous” journey she had ever experienced. This suppression of Rich’s experience resulted from her collision with the impenetrable myths surrounding mothering.

Reflecting on my own situation, I see that it is not difficult to find outlets for the overwhelming love that I feel for my daughter, for the joy and wonder. These feelings are not taboo, not suppressed; I can voice them out loud.

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80 Rich, op. cit. p. 15.
Indeed they are not only accepted, but expected. It is for this reason, perhaps, that it is largely the flip side, the ‘underbelly’ of the mothering experience that presents in my studio practice.

Visual art, being for me more intuitive, less mediated, than the written word, facilitates the expression of emotions that I, like Rich for so many years, feel unable to voice. Thus my practice opens up a ‘dialogue’ within myself, allowing the expression of otherwise buried emotions. I do not, however, view the emotions expressed in my writing as in any way less valid; the more theoretical and the intuitive responses complement each other.

It is taken as given that art frequently deals with issues of existential magnitude – death, identity, sexuality and so on. Early in my research I pondered why, then, were the existentially profound experiences of pregnancy, giving birth and mothering so underrepresented within contemporary Western art. I conclude that this is largely due to the arrested position of women within our society. As a result of this imbalance, experiences that are particular to women are often still not considered fit subject matter for serious theoretical or creative work. Furthermore, once a woman has entered Dell’oso’s ‘long gullet’, becoming unequivocally a ‘relational being’, she has crossed a watershed that separates her from her childless contemporaries, who can still more or less pass for whole, ‘autonomous’ individuals within Western society. Her professional status, therefore, is diminished.

Yet the individual is not autonomous, but inherently relational. On becoming a mother, a woman’s identity is perceived to diminish, although in terms of her intersubjective (as opposed to individualist) experiences it has actually become richer.

It is often argued as to whether art mirrors or provokes cultural change. I would say that, as regards mothering, they walk in step. I have found that accounts of subjective experiences of mothering, still somewhat
underrepresented within the field of academic writing, are more so in the field of visual art. Will mothers, making work that draws inspiration from and reflects their experience, assist in the redefinition of legal and social horizons advocated by Irigaray? If so these horizons, which have certainly shifted considerably since Kollwitz’s day, may continue to expand until the roles of artist and mother are no longer seen as mutually exclusive, and languages of interruption are recognised as valid – and valuable – means of communication.
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Appendix - Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document

Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document (1973-79)\(^{81}\) comprises six sections made up of a total of 135 small units, produced over a six-year period. It is a painstakingly assembled collage, juxtaposing ‘found’ objects and diagrams with evidence of Kelly’s own “maternal discourse” in the form of diary fragments, transcribed conversations and commentaries – an “obsessive chronicling” that bears witness to what academic and author Jennie Klein describes as the “obsessive attention paid by the mother to the minutia [sic] of the child’s daily life [which] produces the adult that the child becomes.”\(^{82}\)

Although by no means the first artist to explore her own experience of mothering in her art, Kelly’s unambiguous focus left no room for the viewer to avoid acknowledging its manifest content. Perhaps for this reason, the Document seems to be the one work actually by a mother, about mothering, that a wide cross-section of people have both heard of and remembered.

In this longitudinal project, “conceived as an ongoing process of analysis and visualisation of the mother-child relationship”\(^{83}\) and now widely recognised as a seminal work, Kelly took, in the words of feminist art critic, theorist and curator Lucy Lippard, a “courageous stand against the cultural repression of the mother/child experience”.\(^{84}\) The courage that must have been required is evidenced by the initial (and presumably predictable) widespread rejection of the work as “just about a woman and her baby, thereby no fit subject for high culture”.\(^{85}\) It evokes, as Lippard says, “the collaged lives of women who choose both to create and to procreate, to play both masculine and feminine social roles”.\(^{86}\)

At first glance the Document might appear to be largely a child-centred record of the development of Kelly’s son. Overlaid, however, is the subjective experience of the mother, “her stake in that project called motherhood”.\(^{87}\)

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\(^{81}\) The six sections of Mary Kelly’s work Post-Partum Document were compiled 1973-76; the “bookish offspring”, as Kelly describes the bound presentation, was published in 1983. (Kelly, Post-Partum Document, p. xvi.)

\(^{82}\) Jennie Klein, “Motherhood” in New Art Examiner, v28, no. 6, 2001, pp. 19-20. Kelly’s representation of the child as an empty vessel, filled by first the mother’s, and later others’, input, is disputable. See Lippard on “the child’s mind as microcosm of a primal society to be deciphered and then colonised by another social group – mothers, adults.” (Lippard, loc. cit.)

\(^{83}\) Kelly, Post-Partum Document, p. xv.

\(^{84}\) Lippard, loc. cit.

\(^{85}\) ibid.

\(^{86}\) ibid. p. ix.

\(^{87}\) Kelly, Post-Partum Document, p. xvii. Sara Ruddick, theorising maternal thinking, states that “maternal concepts can only be reflective of, and helpful to, mothers if they are anchored in thinking about children.” (Ruddick, “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth”, p. 30.)
This experience is examined throughout the work using a theoretical analysis based largely on Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Through the six sections of the project Kelly represents mothering as a series of separations or "weanings", a gradual process of moving away, according to academic and author Lisa Tickner, from "the physical and psychic interdependence and the pleasurable 'completeness' of the first post-natal period". Kelly says of these stages, "a problem is continually posed but no resolution is reached. There is only a replay of moments of separation and loss, perhaps because desire has no end, resists normalisation, ignores biology, disperses the body".

Kelly’s Document confounds the socially accepted myths, displacing, according to Tickner, "the idea of motherhood as a simple biological and emotional category ... in favor of the recognition of motherhood as a complex psychological and social process". The work refuses, according to Rosemary Betterton, any "simple or easy access of the 'image'" of the artist’s personal experience of the mothering process. Thus Kelly opened a metaphorical can of worms and left the viewer to discover, through examination of "a dense and often difficult textual analysis", that it could not, in the (then) current social climate, be tidily packed away again.

Kelly herself emphasises the "intersubjective relationships which constitute the female subject", stating that the Document "does not describe the unified, transcendental subject of autobiography, but rather, the decentered, socially constituted subject of a mutual discourse". The density of the analytic component of this work arises from Kelly’s dualistic approach to both psychoanalysis and language. She employs psychoanalysis to work through difficult experiences, yet also attempts "a deconstruction of the psychoanalytic discourse on femininity". In her foreword to the document Lippard describes how Kelly, working from both within and without the psychoanalytic discipline simultaneously, intentionally utilises "language which is coincident with the patriarchy" to render a subversive articulation of "the unsaid, the "feminine," the negative signification". In Kelly’s own words the work “functions as part

89 Kelly, Post-Partum Document, p. xvii.
90 Tickner, loc. cit.
92 ibid.
93 Mary Kelly, "Notes on Reading the Post-Partum Document" in Mary Kelly (ed.), Imaging Desire. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996, p. 23. It is indicative of both the density of the work, and its overt reliance on text, that Kelly felt the need to write an article advising viewers how to ‘read’ this work.
94 Tickner, op. cit. p. 465.
95 Lippard, op. cit. p. x.
of an ongoing debate ... [which] includes a critique of the patriarchal bias underlying some of the theoretical assumptions on which the Document is based". 96

Thus the confusion, the multiplicity of interpretations that is the Document can be seen to represent the conflicts felt by a woman who, in raising a child, finds herself trammelled by a language that is “the symbolic system of a patriarchal order”. 97

Soon after you were born your father repeated to me an insight offered by a friend, a father of older children. From the moment of your birth, he said, our parenting would involve a series of losses for me (as mother) and gains for him (as father), as your total dependence on me (through pregnancy and breastfeeding) gave way to your establishment of relationships with other people and your forging of a way for yourself in the world. At the time I was struck by a paradox – that what these men were describing as a series of losses stemmed from a closeness, a 'having', that perhaps they could never experience. Thus the positive side of this – the experience – was being represented only by its changing or ending - as if having a slice of cake and eating it constitutes loss, whilst joining in with the next meal is a gain. This interpretation of mother-child bonding strikes me, three years on, as a laudably 'positive' attitude towards what is, in actuality, a lack in the lives of most fathers. Yes, the losses are felt, I can't deny that – but only because the closeness, the intimacy, has been experienced, and the memories of those experiences remain as treasures. My glass is definitely half full.

In critiquing this work I must acknowledge not only my own relative ignorance of psychoanalysis, but also another lack of qualification: as a sculptor myself, I consider it relevant that I have only seen the bound version of this work, and not experienced the installation in its physical entirety.

However, having qualified my opinions, I must conclude that I am critical of this work, for a number of interrelated reasons. Firstly, I find Kelly’s attempt to work from both inside and outside the psychoanalytic discipline problematic. I don’t doubt that Kelly intends a rejection of certain questionable tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis; however, to my ears any rejection is drowned out by her use, her apparent acceptance, of the very system she is critiquing. 98

96 Kelly, "Notes on Reading the Post-Partum Document", p. 21.
98 I once heard a childcare expert on a television documentary ask a parent, "If I say "Don't think about purple elephants", what's the first thing that comes to your mind?" – to which the parent replied, "Purple elephants." However, I feel the need to acknowledge here that anyone attempting to critique the culture within which they live, and at a certain time, is necessarily limited as to how much distance they can put between themselves and the current cultural hegemonies. Sara Ruddick, for example, in her 1994 essay “Thinking
Secondly, although through the Document Kelly posits an intersubjective model of identity, she does so only for women. I contend that we are all, to paraphrase Kelly, decentered, socially constituted subjects of a mutual discourse\(^99\) – although perhaps women, traditionally often engaged in relational work, have long been closest to realising this. Thirdly, in representing mothering as necessarily entailing loss, Kelly not only colludes with the patriarchal structure that she attempts to critique, but at the same time undermines her own espousal of an intersubjective model of identity.

I understand and acknowledge the vital role played by the Document within the multiple and intersecting histories of art and feminism, developing as it did during a particularly fertile period in the history of what was then known as 'The Women’s Movement'.\(^{100}\) However, perhaps Kelly’s very insistence on using “language which is coincident with the patriarchy”\(^{101}\) ensures that this work, whilst it impresses me and gains my respect, lacks the shift from reality, Marcuse’s “denial of gravity”\(^{102}\), that I value most in art.

Mothers/Conceiving Birth”, examines a stance taken in her earlier work Maternal Thinking (1989). She reflects that, in attempting to disconnect “mothering from birth” she had acted “within a tradition of distrust”, colluding with Western philosophy’s honouring of “mind over body, idea over matter” to unwittingly replicate a misogynist approach to her topic. (Ruddick, “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth”, pp. 37-38.)

\(^{99}\) Kelly, "Notes on Reading the Post-Partum Document", p. 23.

\(^{100}\) Kelly herself, interviewed in 1979, states that “I think the most interesting reading will be the one that follows it, rather than my own - that is, the reading the Women’s Movement will be able to make of it in the future, in the sense of its representation of a particular historical moment within the Women’s Movement, and also within the discourse of past art.” (Terence Maloon, "Interview with Mary Kelly" in Artscribe, no. 13, 1979, p. 18.)

\(^{101}\) Lippard, loc. cit.

\(^{102}\) Carol Becker, loc. cit.
List of visual material

(Images of the works exhibited in SCA Postgraduate Degree Show, 2007)

Image #

1. *Migratory Objects*
2. *Migratory Objects* – with viewer
3. *Migratory Objects* – close-up
4. *Trace* – with viewer
5. *Trace* – ‘filmstrip’ constructed from sequential photographs
6, 7. *Grounded* – installed in SCA quadrangle
8, 9. *Grounded* – with shadow
Catalogue of exhibition

*Migratory Objects* (installation)
Dimensions: 9 units, each 30 x 30 x 200 cm approx.
Materials: organza, latex, helium

*Trace* (video installation)
Dimensions: Area of projected image – approx. 2.5m x 2m
Materials: video footage

*Grounded* (outdoor sculpture)
Dimensions: 4 x 2 m (base) x 1.6 m (height) approx.
Materials: steel