

A MOTHER WORLD

MICHELLE BROWNE REPORTS FROM THE 'MOTHERHOOD AND CREATIVE PRACTICE' CONFERENCE, HELD AT LONDON'S SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY, 1 – 2 JUNE 2015.

The 'Motherhood and Creative Practice' conference, held at London's South Bank University in June 2015, considered all things relating to motherhood through theory and art practices. Luminaries such as Bracha Ettinger, Griselda Pollock, Mary Kelly and Faith Wilding addressed the event. However, there was some unease about the focus of the conference. In her recent *Art Monthly* article, 'Mother and Child Divided', Jennifer Thatcher argued that the conference was "too much about sexual difference". (1) Certainly the impact of lingering patriarchal ideology on the ways in which women are viewed and how they view themselves, along with a focus on rigorous feminist critique and theory, was the preoccupation of several papers (2).

For example, the opening keynote was by artist, theorist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger, who over the last 20 years has developed a complex theory of the feminine – one that challenges the pervasiveness of the 'phallic order' as proposed by Freud and Lacan. In her essay 'Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter Event' Ettinger proposed the birth-giving mother as the potential site for a new interpretation of human relations, analysed as a "poetics of event and encounter". (3) Ettinger proposes a reading of the "womb space" and the "event-encounter" of childbirth and pregnancy as a space where we experience trans-subjective links. She argues that there is a border-link between the living (the mother) and the non-living (the child). This offers a space to rethink our inter-subjective ethical relationships. Ettinger notes that the "matrixial" or womb is a symbolic space and can also be accessed by the male.

In her paper Ettinger furthered her argument, outlining the concept of "carriance". She stated: "I am, hence I carry. I am, thence I am carried". Through this she explored an ethics of "being in the world *together*", again an idea accessible to both male and female. Ettinger continued by discussing what she calls the "shock of maternity", which combines a number of stages from the desire to have a child, fertility, pregnancy and birth, and maternity (pregnancy and birth being the only stages that are not also related to male experience). Ettinger also noted the tendency in psychoanalysis to position the mother as a "ready-made mother monster" – "the basket for the disposal of toxic psychic material", and a cause of

self-loathing, self-blaming guilt, casting the maternal shock as a psychological abnormality. Ettinger's work aims to re-normalise these states and claim them as positive moments where certain "invisible experiences are made available for thought".

Many of the presentations that followed this address sought to reclaim and make visible the experiences of motherhood / parenthood in ways akin to Ettinger's approaches. In panels such as *Everyday Life, Art and Parenthood*, *Performing Mothers Baby* and *Practicum of Mothering* issues around the practicalities of having a child and maintaining an art practice were explored.

Townley and Bradby, an artist duo who are parents to three children, spoke about the effort to maintain space to create within the domestic space, focusing on the repetitive nature of family life. *The Invisible Spaces of Parenthood*, a collaboration between Andrea Francke and Kim Dhillon, focused on their work engaging with the politics of motherhood and the often invisible act of caring for children (4). Francke had created a nursery for her graduate show to highlight the closing down of the existing nursery in Chelsea College of Art – where she was studying – in 2009. Francke pointed out that the student body and academy saw childcare as a private responsibility, albeit one which impacted mostly women. Similarly, Dhillon noted that the Royal College of Art, where she is currently a PHD candidate, has no childcare provision for students. Back in 1974 / 1975 facilities had been made available as a result of student mobilisation. Dhillon is from Quebec, where highly subsidised childcare is provided by the state. Francke also outlined her research into the Danish model of childcare and highlighted the fact that childcare is provided in Denmark, in order to allow children to learn to participate in a democracy.

Chicago-based Christa Donner of Cultural Reproducers and UK-based Martina Mullaney of Enemies of Good Art mirrored this focus on childcare provision in their presentations. (5) Both have examined the area of childcare provision at art institutions and how this affects their ability to access exhibitions as professional members of the art community. Donner asked: If IKEA and certain gyms can provide childcare to access their facilities, why can't large art institutions?

It was noted that motherhood becomes a moment of radicalisation for women, a point echoed in many of the panels. As part of the childbirth panel, Emma Finucane and Mia Oshin of Project Afterbirth and UK artist Rosalind Howell all spoke of their experience of the over-medicalised

model of childbirth. In their work they are interested in exploring real experiences of childbirth, rather than medicalised accounts and processes – which are far removed from an innate faith in the body’s ability to give birth – or saccharine representations of pregnancy and childbirth as gentle, painless and stress free experiences.

Faith Wilding and Irina Aristarkhova further explored fertility and technologies of reproduction in their keynote. They questioned the ideological undercurrents at play in the rise of the fertility industry, including searches for a substitute for the female reproductive body – a mother machine. They noted four elements in this desire to enable “genesis somewhere else”: removing the maternal body (as an uncontrollable entity in the production line); a social desire to free women from the child birthing role; gaining access to and control of gestation, birth etc; bio-ethical reasons – it allows those who can’t have children to do so without the legal and ethical problems associated with surrogacy.

Wilding and Aristarkhova also highlighted the surrogacy industry’s relationship to class and labour, discussing international surrogacy / fertility tourism, where mostly poorer women in developing nations provide eggs or surrogacy to wealthy middle class couples from developed nations. They quoted Judith Butler, asking: “Who tends for the life of the child? ... Who cares for the life of the mother, and of what value is it ultimately?” (6)

It’s hard to do justice to a conference of such depth and breadth. Other panels explored childlessness, grief at the loss of a child, single-parenting and the hetero-normalising of gay couples on TV, to name but a few subjects. Mary Kelly, although unable to attend, was a strong presence through the influence of her work on many artists who presented. A video of her keynote presentation highlighted her “interest in point of connection and separation between mother and child; domestic labour and ideology; between war and our limited capacity to prevent, and between duration, narrative and memory”. (8)

Rounding up, feminist art historian Griselda Pollock asked us to think about what meaning is given to our capacity in the maternal-feminine. Pollock invited us to consider this condition as not just about the mother-child relationship, but about our broader capacity for care and about how society is organised. Ultimately, she noted that there is a responsibility to make public these issues and theories to impact culture and imagine ‘an (m)other world’.

Michelle Browne is an artist and curator based in Dublin and she has a five-year-old daughter. She is a member of the Mothership Project, a network of Irish parenting visual artists and arts workers. For more information or to join go to themothershipproject.wordpress.com

Notes

1. Art Monthly, Issue 388, July – August 2015, 11 – 14
2. The role of the ‘woman in the home’ is still enshrined in Article 41 of the Irish constitution. Valerie Connor, referencing Julia Kristeva, has noted that “materialising the image of ‘woman’, precisely to fill an ideological space, renders the figure symbolically static and its meaning fixed. The maternal figure becomes an index of symbolised social relations and community’ *Feminism, Democratic Politics and Citizenship*, Third Text, Vol.19, Issue 5, September 2005, 511.
3. B. Ettinger, ‘Weaving a Woman Artist With-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Sage, London, 2004, Vol. 21, 69.
4. The 2013 Irish census found that “more than 98% of those who were looking after home / family in 2013 were women, with close to half a million women looking after home / family compared to only 8,700 men”
5. culturalreproducers.org
6. J. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, New York, 2004, 205
7. Dr Lisa Baraitser in response to Mary Kelly’s keynote screening